

**A theopoetic reflection on Thomas Traherne,
Meister Eckhart
and Mother Julian of Norwich**

by

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Abstract

A theopoetic reflection on Thomas Traherne, Meister Eckhart and Mother Julian of Norwich

This study provides a poet's readings of the non-dualism of Thomas Traherne, Meister Eckhart and Mother Julian of Norwich. Traherne, Eckhart and Julian are interpreted as theopoets of the body/soul who share what might be described as moderate non-dualism. They also share a concern for unitive spiritual experience, expressed in their attempts to balance an absolute level of truth with a conventional level of truth. Separate chapters on Traherne, Eckhart and Julian focus on their differing - yet commensurate - non-dual registers. On their view, the *conditio sine qua non* of 'being human' is participation in the divine. Two additional chapters link the so-called mysticism of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian with construals of both 'the Self' and spiritual awakening, as enunciated by *Advaita Vedānta*. My own poems are integrated into the text. Many issues explored in the text are contested and aporetic and my own readings may not always be shared by others. Although aware of the usefulness of dualism, and of the subject/object distinction in particular, I seek to provide a countervailing perspective to the general Western over-emphasis on the separateness of the human and the divine. In so doing, I hope to show that Traherne, Eckhart and Julian can be read in consonance and even at times in innovative ways.

Abbreviations

BgG (or Gītā): Bhagavad Gītā

Gk: Greek

KJV: King James Version

L: Latin

LT: Julian's Long Text

MHG: Middle High German

NJB: New Jerusalem Bible

NT: New Testament

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version

REB: Revised English Bible

Skt: Sanskrit

ST: Julian's Short Text

Up: Upanishad

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Introduction

*The great religions are the ships;
poets are the lifeboats.
Every person I know has jumped overboard.*
- Hafiz (Daniel Ladinsky, trans.)

The metaphorical process of poetry is the natural predecessor and the continuing ally of theology. At its best, theology has always probed ultimate questions with an awareness of its own dependence on metaphor. Sensing the role of imaginative intuition, good theologies are rightly chary of putting forward absolute certitudes. Aware of the necessity of creativity in theologizing, Stanley R. Hopper writes as follows:

When language fails to function at the metaphorical or symbolic levels,
the imagination goes deeper, soliciting the carrying power of archetype,
translating the archetype from spent symbolic system into fresh embodiments.¹

Theopoetic writing consciously includes the attempts of the imagination, rather than of logic or of analytical reason, to express the Inexpressible. The current return to theopoetics was famously fore-grounded by Emerson who asserted that theology and philosophy would one day be taught by poets. Within its hybridized, sometimes unorthodox ways of attempting the impossible, theopoetic readings of texts may be presented, re-presented, interpreted against the

¹ Quotation from: *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoiesis*, Hopper S.R. (Keiser, R.M. & Stoneburner, T., eds.) Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1992.

apparent grain and laced with tidbits of personal experience. Relevant nouns include the following: ‘intersection’, ‘interpellation’ ‘connection’ and ‘reconnection’.²

This study responds to the relative neglect of what could be termed ‘spiritual non-dualism’ in the Western heritage. From this particular poet’s point of view, the neglect implicates those people with a vested interest in the distortion of hierarchical structures. But it is not my intention to address any damage caused by excessively dualistic patterns. Rather, I intend to bring to the fore the non-dual tone of Thomas Traherne, Meister Eckhart and Mother Julian of Norwich. Their qualified or moderate non-dualism will form a structuring motif of this study.

For present purposes the term ‘non-dual’ implies bringing the subject (for example, the Source or the One) and the object (for example, a worshipper of the Source) more closely together.³ Although Traherne’s type of non-dualism could be nominated as ‘experiential non-dualism’ in partial distinction from the ‘more conceptual non-dualism’ of Eckhart and perhaps Julian, this is unsatisfactory. Each of these writers is concerned with ‘spiritually non-dual’ experience, and none of them defines the sense (or senses) in which they favour non-dualism. Distinctively, Traherne begins with re-creations of a child’s sense of non-duality. He keeps imaginative truth in tension with conceptual truth; he keeps experiential truth in tension with both. Accordingly

² The current literature on theopoetics ranges from the self-referential and solipsistic to the more helpful and sometimes theocentred. Appraisals include: a number of articles in *Cross Currents* 60:1 (2010), *passim*; Callid Keefe-Parry *Theopoetics: Process and Perspective*, in *Christianity and Literature* 58:4 (2009) pp.579-601; Matt Guynn *Theopoetics: That the dead may become gardeners again*, in *Cross Currents* 56:1 (2006) pp.98-109; Scott Holland *Theology is a kind of writing: The emergence of theopoetics*, in *Cross Currents* 47:3 (1997) pp.317-331.

³ The distinctions of Western dualism are helpful, to a degree. Historically, they have been emphasized to the point where they harden into separations. Classic dualities include: subject/object, God/humanity, spirit/matter, one/many, inside/outside, cause/effect, good/evil, heaven/hell, free will/determinism, knower/known, self/other, mind/body. A common assumption has been that of regarding ‘mind’ as distinct from ‘matter’. But dualities can fade; it is no longer generally thought that ‘mind’ has nothing in common with ‘matter’. By the same token, religious people no longer uniformly consider that anything resembling a materialist account of thinking is subversive to the idea of a soul.

his poetry moves between a claimed experience of ‘oneness’ with the divine and an experience of ‘otherness’ from the divine. The experience of ‘not twoness’ might be said to equate with a kind of inner resurrection or on-going process of identification with the Source. But, as implied above, neither Traherne, Eckhart nor Julian discuss varieties of non-dualism. They are unlikely to share an identical non-dual stance, and their individual views might oscillate between various meanings.⁴ Their intention is to awaken their hearers and readers, not to a conceptual understanding of non-dualism, but to what they understand as Christocentric non-dual experience.⁵

The focus of chapter one lies with Traherne. Chapter two goes backward in time to focus on the work of Eckhart. Chapter three moves slightly forward in time to concentrate on Julian. Chapter four develops the understanding that a non-dual approach to life involves *kenosis*, the practice of self-reduction in order to allow space and time for the care of ‘the other’. The fifth and final chapter offers ‘awakening’ as an implied theme of my chosen writers. Possible convergences between Traherne, Eckhart and Julian are brought forward. Implicitly they share the notion that as we awaken from a sense of ‘twoness’, of separation from others, we are more likely to respond with inclusive love. I picture them as re-weaving ‘feeling’ with ‘thought’ and as re-weaving spirituality with theology. The divine and the human are understood to share something fundamental: both are constituted by relationship. Here I aspire to be faithful to theology as practical philosophy. I also desire to be true to an understanding of *perichoresis*,

⁴ Denys Turner directly assesses the Eckhartian aporetic concerning non-dualism (see chapter two of the present study).

⁵ David Loy, who expounds non-dualism from within a Buddhist commitment, distinguishes three main types. These are: ‘... the negation of dualistic thinking, the non-plurality of the world, and the non-difference of subject and object.’ Traherne, Eckhart and Julian support an experience of the divine in which the distinction between subject and object is somewhat collapsed. Therefore Loy’s third type of non-dualism is the type most applicable to the three Christians. See Loy’s *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CONN, 1988, p.17 & p.25f.

the ‘inter-permeating’ life of the divine, as portrayed in the traditional Christian ‘theopoem’ of the Trinity. *Kenosis*, and the *perichoretic* life to which it leads, are linked in a visceral way to an openness associated with lived experience.⁶ All five chapters of this study represent a poet’s perspective, and a poet’s desire to recover non-dual vision and non-dual action within bodily spiritual life. Accordingly, some of my own poetry is deployed, where it appears to interweave the work of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian. These writers are viewed as agents of Love’s transforming narrative. They are seen as theopoets who manifest the pains and joys of humanity. In vast armfuls, so to say, they gather up the connected dance of the cosmos. Then they seek to divest themselves of all.

Traherne was active in the Commonwealth era of English history and in the Restoration period (Charles the Second). His origins remain obscure; it is known that he attended Brasenose College in Oxford. The records of the college imply that he was probably born in 1637. He graduated BA in 1656 and MA in 1661. Documents of the Church of England state that he was appointed to the parish of Credinhill, in the county of Hereford in 1657 although he was not ordained as a priest until about three years later. Traherne left his rural parish in 1669, having been appointed as a private chaplain to one of the king’s functionaries in London, the Lord Keeper of the Seal (Sir Orlando Bridgeman). The last years of his life were spent with the Bridgeman family in their home in Teddington (then a village on the outskirts of London). He died in 1674 and was buried within the local church.

⁶ Such experience might be better conveyed in German than in English, which lacks the purport of difference as between *Erfahrung* or the ongoing process of experience which includes broadening of perspective and a consequent self-transformation, and *Erlebnis*, which connotes experience in a contingent, impermanent sense (cf. the Buddhist understanding of contingent experience).

The literary era in which Traherne lived was dominated by the names of Milton, Dryden and Marvell. Compared with these writers, he is idiosyncratic. His style and diction set him apart; his enthusiasm is unrestrained. And yet his vitality is curiously fused with abstraction; his poetry and prose are laced with a theology both heterodox and orthodox.⁷ And although his work uses various modes and covers diverse subjects, he scarcely touches contemporary issues. He gives us no clue as to the upheavals of seventeenth century European history.

Eckhart was born in the village of Hochheim in Germany in about 1260. He became a friar of the Dominican Order, later graduating in theology/philosophy from the University of Paris. This entitled Eckhart to be known by the academic title of Meister. He quickly became popular as a preacher, lecturer and debater, in Paris and in large areas of Germany. The year and place of his death is uncertain; leading Eckhartian scholars suggest 1328. He is thought, at an early age, to have been influenced by the scholarship of Albert the Great and by a group of broad-minded Dominicans who gathered around Albert in Germany. They were appreciative, not only of Neoplatonism, but of Jewish and Islamic philosophy. Eckhart probably represents the closest Western analogue to the *Advaita Vedānta* of Ramana Maharshi (d.1950). I will later discuss Ramana in positive terms. The leading writers of this study are held together by their tendency to collapse the assumed objective world into boundlessness or ultimate formlessness. To express it in a positive way, my writers are compatible in their emphasis on unitive reality

⁷ Traherne follows Sir Philip Sidney (d.1586) who follows Horace (d. 8 BCE) in believing that poetry should either delight or educate: '*aut delectare aut prodesse est*'.

or unitive consciousness. Entrance into such a life is construed as entrance into the life of limitless Awareness.⁸ Such is the human *raison d'être*.

Julian's now famous book is accepted as one of the first European prose works written by a woman. Born in 1342 (about 13 years after the death of Eckhart) Julian died between 1416 and 1420. She wrote *Showings* (or: *Revelations of Divine Love*) while living as an anchoress in a cell attached to St. Julian's Church, in the city of Norwich in the English county of Norfolk. The book consists of reflections on what she describes as sixteen visions of the Passion. She states that she experienced these visions during severe illness in 1373. The intended readers of Julian's *Showings*, in both its short and long versions, were 'God's faithful lovers'. This is made clear in a brief but anonymous introduction to her fourteenth century manuscript. Until last century, the number of the book's readers, whether faithful lovers of God or not, was modest.

As inferred earlier, chapter four elaborates my readings of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian to the effect that non-dual experience leads to a self-abandoning (*kenotic*) life. These writers are interested in 'a true identity' emerging from 'a false identity'.⁹ I intend to make use of the concepts of true and false self. Although this particular dualism might find its analogy in an Eastern tradition, the intention will not be comparative. Different texts rely on different

⁸ The words 'limitless Awareness' are used in view of their resonance with the *Ātmā* or 'the Self' (capital 'S') associated with the philosophical system of *Vedānta*. The present study employs 'the Self' (capital 'S') to connote the limitless, ever-aware, innermost principle of life, traditionally discussed as existence-consciousness (*sat-chit*). Accordingly, the references to this 'Self' (capital 'S') have no connection with modern proclivities such as individual self-esteem or self-enhancement. Christian equivalents of the *Vedāntin* 'abidance in the Self' might be 'abidance in the Spirit' or 'abidance in the divine Word'. Arguments for and against such parallels are beyond the scope of this study.

⁹ To them 'sin' seems primarily to be an erroneous way of identifying 'who we are'. Ergo, sin is enacted in ways that have no positive content.

conceptions; comparison is not appropriate.¹⁰ There are, admittedly, pitfalls to any discussion about a true and a false self, especially if one's imaginings are confined to a hypothetical, 'inner reserve' of separateness from the world.¹¹ It would be rash to declare that the non-dualism of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian parallels the dominant non-dualism from the subcontinent. But a *congruency of sympathy* is evident, although the metaphysical presuppositions differ. Accordingly, I link the work of the three Europeans with construals of both 'the Self' (capital 'S') and spiritual awakening, as enunciated by *Advaita Vedānta*. The concept of 'the Self' (capital 'S') should be understood as the innermost principle or substrate of humanity; indeed, of the universe itself.

It is well known that writers within the Asian traditions conduct their work at the Absolute truth-level as well as at the conventional truth-level. Traherne, Eckhart and Julian do the same. This is not surprising. Since its early centuries, Christianity has made use of the concept of two truths. It has also included a non-dualism which goes back to the Gospel accounts.¹² Jesus is represented as teaching in a way that was considered transgressive by the power-brokers of his day. He provided an alternative to the traditional dualistic approaches.

¹⁰ Debates concerning the phenomenal or individual self and the Self with a capital 'S' (the *Ātmā*) obviously took place in India many centuries before Eckhart *et al.* But *Vedānta*, as the philosophical substrate of Hinduism, is concerned with absolute truth and does not venture into the conditioned language of dualism, as between the phenomenal self and the Self (capital 'S'). Within later *Advaita Vedānta*, an apparent bifurcation between the *Ātmā* and the phenomenal self need not always imply that the latter is of little consequence. On the contrary, the *Ātmā* or Self (capital 'S') is potentially manifested in and through the (small 's') self. Clive Hamilton, in pithy asides on Hindu philosophy, writes as follows: 'Finding the universal Self, the ultimate subject, is the secret door to the citadel. This is the most profound discovery of the *Upanishads*. ... To understand the identity of the subtle essence (Brahman) and the universal Self (Atman) is the purpose of life, as captured in the emblematic principle of Hindu philosophy *Thou art that*.' Hamilton later writes: 'When Jesus said that the meek shall inherit the Earth, he meant that only those who transcend their identification with the ego-self in the phenomenon will find the path to the universal Self in the noumenon.' See Hamilton, C., *The Freedom Paradox: Towards a Post-Secular Ethics*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2008, p.139 and p.312.

¹¹ Less problems attend a commonplace acceptance that the entity known as 'the self' (small 's') is largely created by the needy, desire-filled and sometimes joyful external world.

¹² Most notably: 'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30 NRSV).

Traherne attempts to bridge the concepts of immanence and transcendence, where ‘transcendence’ refers to a form of existence which is ‘other’ than humankind. Immanence refers to the on-going embodiment of transcendence. That is to say, immanence implies the earthly and day to day ‘arrival’ of whatever is meant by transcendence. Paradoxically, Traherne would seem to regard the transcendent as participating *within* immanence. He appears, with Julian and Eckhart, to assume that the divine exists both outside the world and inside it. The divine remains transcendent and yet can be encountered within the world of nature and of culture. All three writers naturally attempt to find a balance between transcendence and immanence. Their God is the One Source, who is non-totalitarian and not abstracted from embodied life.¹³ Humanity is deemed to find its integrity, its true Self, in bodily relation to the One Source, conceived as both transcendent and immanent. Hence transcendence is manifest in immanent ways, including solidarity with all humanity.¹⁴ A demanding ‘activity’ from humanity’s perspective, practical transcendence is understood to be within life rather than beyond it. A feature, therefore, of the theopoetic work of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian is their tempering of the abstract with the quotidian; indeed, with the bodily and the instinctual. They evince a pastoral intention which is based on the view that humanity, to be true to itself, must participate in three dimensions: reason, emotion, and faith. They

¹³ As per Acts 17:28, the One within whom we ‘live and move and have our being’ (NRSV).

¹⁴ Henri Le Saux (a.k.a. Swami Abhishiktananda) who is of tangential relevance to parts of the present study, could write: ‘All that the Christ said or thought about himself, is true of every man. It is the theologians who – to escape being burnt, the devouring fire – have projected (rejected) into a divine *loka* (sphere) the true mystery of the Self.’ Quotation from: *Swami Abhishiktananda: His life told through his letters* (Stuart, J., ed.) ISPCK, Delhi, 2000, p.287. Bruno Barnhart, in *The Future of Wisdom* (Continuum, NY, 2007, p.113) offers the idea that Eckhart’s unitive vision anticipates the views of Abhishiktananda.

recognize that the eye of faith can degenerate into delusion or illusion, when severed from reason and emotion.

It is my view that an implicit ‘metaphysics of participation’ is relevant today, even in versions of theology which are regarded as post-metaphysical. Further, that theopoetics is the natural dancing floor, as it were, for the tender gyrations of tension between transcendence and immanence. The dancing is experienced as an embodied way of being, and then, as an incarnational way of *seeing*. As theopoetics becomes more widely ‘named’ as such (for its attempt to say the unsayable, and then to unsay it)¹⁵ differing perspectives will continue to emerge. An expansive theopoem which takes a *perichoretic* approach to ‘construing God’ will place communion (rather than, for example, unknowability) within God’s heart. The word *perichoresis* comes from the Greek words ‘*chorus*’ which literally means ‘dance’ and ‘*peri*’ which means ‘around’. For Christians *perichoresis* came to mean the interpenetration of the three ‘persons’ who are imagined as comprising the Source of All.¹⁶ The word can also evoke the interpenetration of all creation by the Source, which is said to coinhere in all things.¹⁷ Since it is demonstrable in human relations, *perichoresis* can be imagined as taking place ‘within

¹⁵ For an essay which flags this likelihood within a discussion of the work of Hélène Cixous, see Krista E. Hughes ‘Intimate Mysteries: The Apophatics of Sensible Love’ in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, (Boesel, C. & Keller, C., eds.) Fordham University Press, NY, 2010, pp.349-366.

¹⁶ Daniel F. Stramara writes: ‘Their relationships are not static but “revolve around” one another. ... The Persons whirl “about” each other and inside of each other. The depiction is one of mutual admiration, each Person “falling all over” the other, glorying in the other. In a sense, the Persons are continually “falling in love”’. Quotations from: ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s Terminology for Trinitarian Perichoresis’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 52:3 (August, 1998) Brill, Leiden.

¹⁷ The word ‘interpermeation’ might be more helpful than ‘interpenetration’.

God'. Beyond relationality in God, the *perichoretic* notion might also point to a divine passion for relationship with all creation.¹⁸

Richard Kearney pictures *perichoresis* as 'God-play'. He writes of '... a circular movement where Father, Son, and Spirit gave place to each other in a gesture of reciprocal dispossession rather than fusing into a single substance'.¹⁹ A well-known visual expression of 'God-play' is the icon *The Holy Trinity*, painted by Andrei Rublev (d.1430). To spend time with this icon is to see three figures which are distinct, yet not separate. Even as they sit together, they defer to each other. The atmosphere is calm, yet there is interaction or interplay; indeed, a calm but vibrant, circulatory exchange of energy. I will return to Rublev's visual theopoem in chapter four.

Traherne, Eckhart and Julian share the Rublevian concern with communion. If spiritual life is a movement towards (re)union with the Source, it implies a 'dynamic wholeness' which is prefigured within this world. The life of Jesus can thus be viewed as a mirror of the life of each person. In a mysterious, non-dual way, human beings are understood to be participants in the life, death and renewed life of Jesus. This is the primary theopoem of Christian tradition; it is not located elsewhere, but is grounded in life's perpetual 'now-ness'. Based in participatory consciousness, it is a theopoem with a unifying and transformative vision.

¹⁸ It could be said, in defence of the Trinitarian idea, that such a symbolic structure was originally imagined in order to forestall the possibility of a rival symbolic structure, such as that of an *unconnected* or isolated Being. (I am told that within one system of Amer-Indian religion, God is understood to speak only four words: 'Come dance with me.')

¹⁹ The quotation is from Kearney's *The God Who May Be*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2001, p.109.

A claim of grace-given incorporation within the Source has long been recognized in Eckhart. But the non-dual tone of Traherne and Julian has either been insufficiently recognized or overlooked. A burgeoning popular literature on Julian highlights her refreshing emphasis on feminine images for the divine. This is sometimes held to be her greatest contribution. Julian's non-dual aspect, and her resonance with her near-contemporary Eckhart (and much later with Traherne) tends to be set to one side. Her work does not seem to have been known by Traherne, but given that he could read Greek, Latin, Italian and French, it is probable that he had access to the Latin works of Eckhart.

My three writers share basic assumptions such as the existence of realities that are completely independent of the mind. There is principally the assumption of a God who is One yet manifests in a triune way. Such a God is not an object which can be known or studied, as such. Indeed, Traherne, Eckhart and Julian extend privilege to the concept of 'not knowing', at the expense of 'knowledge'. Within this somewhat alternative tradition, there is a degree of nervousness about placing consciousness in one camp (the camp that 'knows') and placing 'that which is known' in another camp.

To recapitulate, Traherne, Eckhart and Julian treat the mystery of 'not twoness' as normative. A neglected emphasis within Christianity, expressions of this mystery are nonetheless as old as the statements attributed to Jesus which have a non-dual tone. Re-constructed in the four Gospels, these statements are the poetic, epigrammatic and parabolic legacy of Jesus and imply a reversal of contemporary dualisms. Various situations are reversed; people do not receive their just deserts; the official guests at a wedding are marginalized; homeless people are

embraced; the established economic order becomes unworkable. People listening to Jesus are invited to place themselves within the 'is-ness' of the moment. They are stimulated to view life as an opening out of relationships. The Source of all relationality is construed as true and just, but not according to the standards of the dualistic, contingent, impermanent world.²⁰

A moderate non-dualism does not carry with it a complete and definitive code of belief or behaviour. It perhaps implies that any final appeal to external authority holds the risk of becoming untenable. Within such a frame, there is less emphasis on the attainment of supposedly higher moral standards, and more emphasis on expressions of the unitive mystery. Efforts to inculcate higher standards, as if by decree, are seen as moralism; moralism, in turn, is seen as an exclusion of reciprocity and, therefore, communion.²¹

Traherne expresses a hunger for 'co-union' with the Source. He comes close to claiming that you and I can be incorporated within the Source. This amounts to an assertion of mystical knowledge, even when allowance is made for the imprecision of the word 'mystical'. Many of us might be uncomfortable with such an assertion; we are perhaps the heirs of Kant. We might wish to dismiss their approach as credulously assuming 'a God's eye view of the world'. The matter may be largely one of perceptual experience; Traherne, Eckhart and Julian hint at a particular kind of awareness. It is an awareness that emerges from a non-dual tendency and

²⁰ Cf. Catherine Keller: 'Jesus was always deconstructing the operative absolutes, the do's, don'ts, and I believe's. To deconstruct is not to destroy but to expose our constructed presumptions.' See Keller, C., *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2008, p.138.

²¹ Some of my statements will tend to over-simplify the question of duality v. non-duality, given that there are varieties of both; indeed, ontological categories and sub-categories of monism, dualism, pluralism and non-dualism, an analysis of which is beyond the scope of this study. But, see footnote 5 regarding David Loy's three main types of non-dualism. And cf. the following remarks by Taitetsu Unno. 'Non-duality is not the opposite of duality, nor is it a simplistic negation of duality. Non-duality affirms duality from a higher standpoint. It is not an abstract concept but lived reality. But the difficulty is in understanding it, because we have here a double exposure, so to speak, of duality and non-duality.' See Unno's *River of Fire, River of Water: an Introduction to the Pure Land Tradition of Shin Buddhism*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1998, p.132.

includes a concern that humanity's lived experience should be one of true and just relations. A spiritual quality obviously interweaves a concern for relationality. In Traherne, Eckhart and Julian this moves beyond 'relationship' and heads in the direction of 'identity'. Therefore, within their varied conceptions, my chosen theopoets favour a move beyond a 'relationship' with Jesus the Christ, towards 'identity' with him. If they do not use the word 'identity', this is my reading of their implication. On this interpretation, Christianity is less a reiteration of 'belief' than a communication of *being* Christ to the other, who is also 'Christ.'²²

Traherne differs from Eckhart and Julian, who in turn differ from each other. But all three base their lives and their writings upon a sense of divine presence. They view human life as a process of returning to the Infinite One who creates consciousness. Either through an epiphanic occurrence or, more typically, through a gradual surrendering of the false self, these writers desire that we should divest ourselves of what today might be called ego-centredness. They desire that we should 'Realize' (that is to say, in affective, lived experience) that we are 'anchored' in non-dual or unitive consciousness. Thereafter, that we might progressively cease to think, feel and act from a sense of separation.²³

²² Within such a perspective, this might be seen as tantamount to a person manifesting 'as heaven itself'. A rendering of one of the Mahānārāyaṇa Uṣ. expresses it as follows: 'Heaven is within the inner chamber, the glorious place which is entered by those who renounce themselves' (12:4).

²³ Quotations from the texts of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian, with attendant commentaries, are intended to bear out my assertion of their desire.

Chapter One: Thomas Traherne

Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos

Random as rags whooshed off a truck,
they indolently amble on the air. This caterwaul:
wee-la. Yes, there,

husky, high. It seems an idle sortie,
a lope of meander-flight, a frittering in the eye
of foul weather.

Gale winds begin to split and peel
a suburb of weather-board husks, but the flock
keeps following its memory-grid

to grubs in weakened trees. (Birds like these
saw dinosaurs plod through dust.)
They prise, rip,

rasher the acacia bark, and change trees,
wheeling and veering like black Venetian blinds
collapsed at one end.

Then they dip, curious,
to an English willow;
shimmy down bare verticals on hinge-claws;

whir out
on a glissade of whoops:
concertina-tailed, splay-winged, wailing.

Although Thomas Traherne is a spontaneous, vigorous poet, his work carries a consistent, theopoetic argument: all things in the universe are interconnected and inherently valuable. Ahead of his time, Traherne writes of a universal partnership. He asks his readers: ‘Can you

see the way things *are*? Do you not experience them as *inseparable*?' References to the natural world are frequent but brief in Traherne; he usually allows the reader to provide contextual detail. In my own poems, such as *Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos*, above, I tend to elaborate natural observations a little more than does Traherne. But I hope to adhere, like him, to an openness that is both exultant and meditative.

As already hinted, Traherne does not treat the words 'God' and 'world' as denoting two completely extrinsic realities. The divine is transcendent, but not in the sense of 'floating entirely free' of this world. It is within our immanent and significant world that divine and human transcendence work together.²⁴ Traherne has a vision of the reciprocity of 'all Things'. It is *here* that we are able, or unable, to transcend that which defeats us. Ordinary, potentially 'Joyfull' life is where transcendence is manifested. A mushroom, an ant, a stone has inherent value. This value resides within the entities themselves; it is not merely 'endorsed' by an extrinsic God.

For most of humanity's literate history, poetry's purpose has been to contemplate the divine. In Traherne's England, this purpose included the consideration of *all life* as linked to the divine. Within such a view, each finite thing can reveal infinitude. In modernist terms, a poet might speak of 'Reality' as a stand-in for the divine and describe it as a web of singularities, none of which is completely separate, and all of which seem to be 'in process' in different ways. But

²⁴ Traherne would have endorsed the following viewpoint of Jean-Pierre de Caussade, S.J., who was born in 1675, the year following Traherne's death: 'God's activity runs through the universe. ... The actions of created beings are veils which hide the profound mysteries of the workings of God.' (Quotations from: *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Image/Doubleday, NY, 1975, p.25f & p.36.) But Traherne goes further and vests all things with value for their own sake.

Traherne (together with Eckhart and Julian)²⁵ uses patristic language. This includes a vision of infinite goodness; it also takes account of humanity's desire to 'find itself' within that goodness. The God of Traherne and predecessors is One, and yet triadic in manifestation. In my understanding, this means that God is held, *simultaneously*, to be the giver of goodness, the gift of goodness itself, and the 'process of goodness-giving'. This Infinite One is 'all-ways relating'; such is the mystery of all things relational, and therefore of communion and community.

A devout humanist

Traherne is a poet who trusts his own sensations. This trust is not separate from his trust in the divine. Traherne believes that all five senses are part of God's way of manifestation. From scripture and through intuition, the poet deduces that the divine is interested in human pleasure and human understanding, and not only in 'the work of salvation' (as narrowly conceived). For our part, biblical faith, mental assent and right judgment are required. And yet, for Traherne, knowledge does not begin with the senses, only to be refined by the intellect and/or the spirit. In the poem *My Spirit*, he regards his spirit as inseparable from the senses that pertain to that spirit. He acknowledges no ultimate separation between spirit and intellect. Both are parts of the whole; they inform each other continually. *My Spirit* appeals to me as Traherne's most overtly non-dual piece of writing; I will progressively quote most of it and venture brief comments. These are the opening and closing verses:

²⁵ See chapters two and three of this study.

My Naked Simple Life was I.
 That Act so Strongly Shind
 Upon the Earth, the Sea, the Skie,
 It was the Substance of my Mind.
 The Sence of self was I.
 I felt no Dross nor Matter in my Soul,
 No Brims nor Borders, such as in a Bowl
 We see, My Essence was Capacitie.
 That felt all Things,
 The Thought that Springs
 Therfrom's it self. It hath no other Wings
 To Spread abroad, nor Eys to see,
 Nor Hands Distinct to feel,
 Nor Knees to Kneel:
 But being Simple like the Deitie
 In its own Centre is a Sphere
 Not shut up here, but evry Where.

*

O Wondrous Self! O Sphere of Light,
 O Sphere of Joy most fair;
 O Act, O Power infinit;
 O Subtile, and unbounded Air!
 O Living Orb of Sight!
 Thou which within me art, yet Me! Thou Ey,
 And Temple of his Whole Infinitie!
 O what a World art Thou! A World within!²⁶

²⁶ *Thomas Traherne: Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, ed. Ridler, A., OUP, London, 1966, p.27 & p.30. Hereinafter 'Ridler'.

The opening line ‘My Naked Simple Life was I’ appears to equate Traherne’s self with Life itself. The non-dual confidence of the first verse is overt. Antony Bellette²⁷ states that the poet identifies the phenomenal with the spiritual. That is to say, the subject matter of the poem, that which concerns ‘my spirit’, is inseparable from *the senses* of that spirit. Bellette continues: ‘... the poem establishes in its opening lines the almost godlike indivisibility of the person’.²⁸ To me, this is part of Traherne’s attractiveness; he cannot separate his participation in a spiritual life from his enjoyment of the world of phenomena.

In the first verse of *My Spirit* the poet risks identifying himself with ‘... a Sphere / Not shut up here, but evry Where’. The second verse (below) speaks of the necessary action which is the outward manifestation of the ‘Sphere’. The ‘Centre’ of the ‘Sphere’ now manifests as the principal ‘Act’.

Whatever it doth do,
It doth not by another Engine work,
But by it self; which in the Act doth lurk.
Its Essence is Transformed into a true
And perfect Act.
And so Exact
Hath God appeared in this Mysterious Fact,
That tis all Ey, all Act, all Sight,²⁹

²⁷ Bellette, A.F., *Profitable Wonders: an Essay on Thomas Traherne*, unpublished manuscript, 1983, p.83.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Ridler, p.27f.

The third verse maintains the focus on a non-dual interaction between mind and matter. Does the reality of the world reside within the poet's mind or within the matter of the world? The question does not concern Traherne. The natural world '...Was all at once within me'. All natural things '... Were my Immediat and Internal Pleasures'. These are phrases which occur in the third verse of *My Spirit*:

Her Store
Was all at once within me; all her Treasures
Were my Immediat and Internal Pleasures,
Substantial Joys, which did inform my Mind.
With all she wrought,
My Soul was fraught,
And evry Object in my Soul a Thought
Begot, or was; I could not tell,
Whether the Things did there
Themselves appear,
Which in my Spirit *truly* seemd to dwell;
Or whether my conforming Mind
Were not even all that therein shind.³⁰

The non-dual purport is well-perceived by Bellette³¹ when he says: 'In the third stanza the act of perceiving objects in the world is virtually equated with the realization of them in the mind (or soul, or spirit, the words seem interchangeable), with the result that material reality and mental act are no longer separable'. *My Spirit* exults in the reality of the material world; the

³⁰ Ridler, p.28.

³¹ *op.cit.*, p.86f.

poet is grateful for his 'Capacitie' to feel 'all Things' (verse one); he understands them all as originating with God's inner rationality.³²

A few lines further on, Traherne baldly states that his soul is '... Simple like the Deitie'. Here again is a remarkable non-duality. Distinctions are blurred, as between the feeling subject and the felt object. Traherne is a participant with the divine; he shares in God's habitation within (as it were) '... a Sphere / Not shut up here, but evry Where.' These concluding words of verse one express an idea of trans-location which is reminiscent of medieval Christian mysticism. The idea comes again in the fourth verse, below. The poet projects his happiness; he can play happily with his use of capitalization. He now writes the words 'Evry where' instead of 'evry Where'.

... my Mind was wholly Evry where
What ere it saw, twas ever wholly there;
The Sun ten thousand Legions off, was nigh:
The utmost Star,
Tho seen from far,
Was present in the Apple of my Eye.
There was my Sight, my Life, my Sence,
My Substance and my Mind
My Spirit Shind
Even there, not by a Transeunt Influence.
The Act was Immanent, yet there.
The Thing remote, yet felt even here.³³

³² In broad terms, Traherne's body of work can be read as a reaffirmation of the Christian-Platonist position that to 'know God' is to 'know' the inner rationality of all being. Likewise, 'to know' the inner rationality of being is to know God as the perfect One in which all rationality participates.

³³ Ridler, p.29.

In the first two lines of this verse, Traherne puns with the word 'wholy'. His mind is not separate from whatever it is engaging with. It is a 'holy' engagement; and the wholeness or holiness is inherent to both parties engaged in the communication. The word 'twas', near the beginning of the lines just quoted, refers ambiguously to the poet's mind and to the item or object or value that his mind is connecting with. He also puns with 'Eye' (sometimes spelt as 'Ey') and 'I'. The poet claims a *seeing* and a *loving* self. His self, the 'I', sees things and then loves the things that it sees.

Here is the fifth verse of *My Spirit*.

O Joy! O Wonder, and Delight!
O Sacred Myserie!
My Soul a Spirit infinit!
An Image of the Deitie!
A pure Substantiall Light!
That Being Greatest which doth Nothing seem!
Why, twas my All, I nothing did esteem
But that alone. A Strange Mysterious Sphere!
A Deep Abyss
That sees and is
The only Proper Place or Bower of Bliss.
To its Creator tis so near
In Lov and Excellence
In Life and Sence,
In Greatness Worth and Nature; And so Dear;
In it, without Hyperbole,

The Son and friend of God we see.³⁴

Traherne writes of a soul which refuses to be intimidated by the doctrine concerning original sin. It is a prelapsarian or Edenic vision; Traherne seems unlikely to have taken a literal view on 'the Fall'. Arthur Clements praises Traherne's acceptance of both an essential self and an inherent beauty. But in a concession to an older tradition, Clements cites D.H. Lawrence to endorse the apparent viewpoint of Traherne that '... the isolated ego (is) a fiction, an illusion, a lesser reality – the glitter of the sun on the surface of the waters'.³⁵

Non-dual lines which are less explicit than *My Spirit* are numerous, such as: 'His Name is NOW, his Nature is forever. / None Can his Creatures from their Maker Sever' (*The Anticipation*, lines 26-27).³⁶ When he writes 'His Name is NOW' the poet is saying, on my construal, that one side does not eclipse the other. Experiential truth and conceptual truth are brought together in a vision of transformation. The poet's concern with 'nowness' has a curious 'modern feel'. He writes: 'By an Act of the Understanding therefore be present now / with all the Creatures among which you live. ... / You are never what you ought till you go out of yourself / and walk among them'.³⁷

³⁴ Ridler, p.29.

³⁵ Clements, A.L., *The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne*, Harvard University Press, Cam., MA, 1969, p.192.

³⁶ Ridler, p.53.

³⁷ Quotation from *Centuries* 2:76 in ed. Margoliouth, H.M., *Thomas Traherne: Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, OUP, London, 1958, vol. 1, p.94. Hereinafter 'Centuries'.

If Traherne is influenced in some respects by several kinds of Neoplatonism, there is no ‘upward’ movement of the senses toward the realm of the Idea. Rather, he views all creation as infused with a divine energy. This draws all things ‘upwards’, but not to an abstract Idea. Traherne believes in the aspiration of all things to recover union with God, as understood in biblically personal terms. Within himself, the poet finds no ultimate separation between intellect and spirit. Bellette³⁸ states that ‘Reality for Traherne is not divisible in this way’. There is, instead, an adherence to a ‘... law of mutuality which unites God and man and harmonizes all imagined opposites’.³⁹ This outlook can be viewed as non-dual Christian materialism.⁴⁰ I will look further at this position (reflected in the poem below) later in the chapter.

Moments

*The mind by its nature is a singulare tantum.
I should say: the overall number of minds is just one.*
- Erwin Schrödinger

Back-lit by low sun,
a magpie flicks mulch aside,
brings death to a millipede,
life to a fledgling.

³⁸ *op.cit.*, p.83.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ As with Jonathan Edwards in New England in the following century, Traherne represents himself as a humanist as well as a Christian: knowledge is grounded in sensory perception, as well as in biblical revelation. Both men advocated ‘a sense of the heart’ as an addition to the five senses in John Locke’s famous treatise. Traherne implies that the heart’s sense of beauty (for example) is superior to a mere opinion or a conception concerning beauty. Perhaps Traherne and Edwards shared a quirkiness which later found expression in the view of C. S. Peirce (d.1914) that our viewpoint on any one thing is identical with our viewpoint on the sensible effects of that thing.

Nothing seems separate:
neither magpie, soil, millipede,
nor eucalypt leaves
that sweep the sky.

Such moments are antithetical
to ecstasy. Perhaps they represent
transcendence in a curious way,
by highlighting the oneness

of terrestrial history.
A myriad-formed presence,
not fully translatable
to sense,

draws me back
to animal unity.
It returns me
to the moment,

to all that any creature
ever has.

Although I imagine inseparability and can sometimes feel it, I do not consistently ‘see it’. Part of the intention of poems such as the one above is to reduce the gap, fostered by religions, between ‘the world’ and ‘the beyond’. The theme (above) of ‘nothing separate’ or ‘animal unity’ does not imply mysticism. Similarly, Traherne’s trope of ‘intermutual Joys’ (from *Ease*, but implied throughout his work) is not inherently mystical, as popularly understood. If the term is taken to imply an interest in the ethereal, then Traherne cannot readily be called

mystical. He is likely to protest that his concerns lie with the sensuous beauty of the material world, seen from a spiritual point of view. The following poem represents another attempt, within the non-dual vision I share with Traherne, to 'harmonize' things which might initially be considered opposites.

Bluebottle Jellyfish at Manly

A maze of withered blue balloons
and hard-to-see spaghetti
strewn on sand: something to note
but not to touch. Each bluebottle,
four creatures in one
or one in four; their birth
and fusion obscure. No-one's sure
why half their population glides
west around the seas,
the others struggling east.

But if we ever saw
the way things are,
we'd know ourselves inseparable
from bags of gas, from tentacles:
the paralysis they promise,
the release.

For Traherne, the word 'spiritual' does not necessarily imply the more modern sense of psychological well-being or 'soulful' potential. By 'spiritual life', Traherne tends to mean the 'pneumatic life'. This becomes clearer with prolonged exposure to the poems. By 'pneumatic'

I mean that he takes the Greek word *pneuma* as having found its equivalence in Christian thought as ‘spirit’, as distinct from *psyche* or ‘soul’. And so, in a context of elevated entreaties and expostulations, Traherne attempts to recapture the unselfconscious happiness of a safe, healthy childhood. But specific details about his own life are not his main concern. Especially in *Centuries*, which consists of both prose and poetry, and in works that conform to a more regular poetic, Traherne writes for the spiritual nourishment of the reader.

Bellette observes that Traherne’s eclectic work has a ‘unifying direction’. This unifier is ‘... the passionate desire to experience God, world and self as one, and to embody this experience in the most effective and appropriate literary form’.⁴¹ In accord with this desire, Traherne’s work carries forward a theme ‘... of the transforming recognition of all that lies about’.⁴² This is encapsulated in Traherne’s use of the word ‘News’. The poet desires to receive ‘News’ rather than, for example, mere information which might have emanated from a supposed authority.

On News

News from a forrein Country came,
As if my Treasure and my Wealth lay there:
So much it did my Heart Enflame!
Twas wont to call my Soul into mine Ear.
Which thither went to Meet
The Approaching Sweet:
And on the Threshold stood,
To entertain the Unknown Good.

⁴¹ *op.cit.*, p.4.

⁴² *ibid.*, p.21.

It Hoverd there,
As if twould leav mine Ear.
And was so Eager to Embrace
The Joyfull Tidings as they came,
Twould almost leav its Dwelling Place,
To Entertain the Same.⁴³

The ‘News’, for Traherne, is true knowledge of the nature of things. He claims that ‘Nothing is so Easy as to teach the Truth becaus the Nature of the Thing confirms the Doctrine’.⁴⁴ But if there is false ‘News’ or incorrect information, then ‘... the Nature of the Thing contradicts your Words’.⁴⁵ The mind which can appreciate the nature of things is closely aligned, in Traherne’s thinking, with the Mind which created those things.

Traherne’s unifying direction, mentioned by Bellette, is shared by Eckhart and Julian. The three also share a meditative tradition which commonly found expression in a theme of spiritual travelling. The metaphor of spiritual life as ‘a journey’ was not always the cliché that it might be today. John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* did not reach wide acclaim until the late seventeenth century. The ‘travelling’ in Eckhart and the others was primarily *a return* to conscious union with the divine. It is an analogue of the Self-realization (*Ātmā siddhi*) of classical *Vedānta*, wherein ‘the Self’ (capital ‘S’) or limitless Awareness is the only ‘subject’, within which everything else appears as an outpoured ‘object’. Traherne shares with Eckhart and Julian a *Vedāntin*-like concern for the *re-cognition* and *re-animation* of God’s image in

⁴³ *Centuries* 3:26, p.125f.

⁴⁴ *Centuries* 3:11, p.117.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

humanity. This image is more than a reflective image, for when the false self reverts to primordial Realization, the true nature of humanity has (re-)emerged. Self-realization (*Atmā siddhi*) is basic to classical *Vedānta*. The origin of the term is no doubt complex; different epochs are likely to have produced different understandings. But the meaning might be summarized in a working definition as follows: an experiential knowledge of the identity of the inner and outer worlds; the identity of subject and object. In Christian terms, the emergence of humanity's true nature can imply a reversion to humanity's prelapsarian nature. On this view, 'Self-realization' might be viewed as a parallel to the 'God-likeness' attributed to the primordial couple in Eden. Within both perspectives there is *participation* in divine activity, within all of one's *temporal* relationships. Within the NT this is summarized in 2 Pet. 1:4, wherein Christ's followers are reminded that they '... share in the very being of God' (REB).

So then, Traherne, Eckhart and Julian share a concern to move beyond 'relationship' with Christ, towards 'identity' with Christ. On this view, Christian life is more the communication of *being* Christ, as distinct from mere belief in Christ. The paradox is that Christians are also understood to be in the process of transformation into Christ. If there is a sense I am *already* Christ, then obviously Christ is yet to be wholly *manifested*. And so the incarnation story remains incomplete; a claim to be 'Christian', includes an expectation that my body/soul is being transformed into the 'true me' which is 'Christ'. I am to relate to 'the other' as Christ relates, indeed, I am to see 'the other', and ultimately all 'others', as Christ. America's most recognizable poet, Walt Whitman (d.1892) declared that he was not a Christian. Nonetheless, he is popularly regarded as having viewed the 'others' as though they were Christ himself. The

following poem of mine recalls Whitman's lived experience (during the American Civil War) of non-separation.

Letter to Walt Whitman re: Iraq

If you were there now,
you'd lie down with those
who struggle on the ground
like half-squashed worms,
down with the maimed,
misused, disowned.

If you were there now,
you'd kneel, importunate,
give yourself to silence, mutely
cradle the stomach-blown
villager.

Traherne appears to believe that the entire created order is endowed with the Eckhartian 'spark'.⁴⁶ All things participate, in measure, in the divine light. Therefore Traherne assumes that a theology of nature, in its own right, is required. In this, he moves well beyond his immediate tradition, which might be taken to assume that nature merely provides the context for humanity. Traherne assumes that a divine energy is immanent in the world of oysters, snails, badgers, fungi, herbs; even stones. If there was a traditional view of 'top down' divine condescension, Traherne wishes to balance it with the 'upward' aspiration of all things. My own theology of nature, as implied in *Sister Spider* (below) and other poems, might be more

⁴⁶ Alluded to in the next chapter.

reserved on the 'upward' movement. But I hope that it shares Traherne's grounded, this-worldly emphasis. Distinctively, for the seventeenth century, his love for the world tilts his theology away from the traditional motif of 'divine descent'. He counsels:

By an Act of the Understanding therefore be present now
with all the Creatures among which you live:
and hear them in their Beings and Operations Praising GOD
in an Heavenly Maner. Som of them Vocaly,
others in their Ministry, all of them Naturaly and Continually.⁴⁷

The following poem was perhaps written in adherence to Traherne's advice.

Sister Spider

This large, sedentary spider
which shares our bathroom,

spending hours wiping droplets
from her leg hair,

has a dusting of animated poppy seeds
on her back.

Greetings, spiders, with whom we inhabit
common space;

⁴⁷ *Centuries* 2:76, p.94.

and potoroo and magpie, also having a part
in us, and we with you.

Greetings to everyday epiphanies;
not forgetting you insects,

in bodiliness our brothers;
and you, the unseen forms

which might infect, or assist,
being heirs with us and all the other creatures

which walk, crawl, fly, slide, multiply,
divide or stay put;

joint heirs of such molecular inheritance
that where our skin stops,

our bodies do not stop,
greetings.

Traherne sees divine energy everywhere. This is not merely a poetic posture; he grounds his thinking, first, in his senses, and second, in a robust reading of scripture. By the latter, I mean that Traherne eschews quietism and any clichéd notion of humility. After his own fashioning, he might be seen as a Christian materialist; in many ways and in many lines he immerses himself in matter.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ He is clearly not a narrow materialist. (A hypothetical question might be asked here: If ‘spirituality’ somehow ‘went missing’ in the world, and if a narrow materialism predominated, could poetry still be written?)

It might also be said that he was a seventeenth century naturalist and humanist, in his own manner. He has an inclination to fill a blank book with ‘Profitable Wonders’, as we see below.

An Empty Book is like an Infants Soul, in which any Thing
may be Written. It is Capable of all Things, but containeth Nothing.
I hav a Mind to fill this with Profitable Wonders.
And since Love made you put it into my Hands
I will fill it with those Truths you Love, without Knowing them:
and with those Things which, if it be Possible, shall shew my Lov;
To you, in Communicating most *Enriching Truths*;
to Truth, in Exalting Her Beauties in such a Soul.⁴⁹

Traherne infers that he has been given a blank book, probably by a patron. It is the late 1650’s or early 1660’s. On one level, he describes in the book his own joy-filled childhood. But it is clear that Traherne has little interest in autobiography. From the start, he intends to write about the realization of spiritual potential. But his ‘Profitable Wonders’ include the notation of earthly ‘Things’; these figure prominently in Traherne and are understood as gifts. Without material gifts, there will be none of his famous ‘Felicity’ (to which I will return). This is because all things bear the divine imprint; the poet’s ‘Empty Book’ (and elsewhere, the image of a mirror) must receive and record (or reflect) the literal matter to hand, in order that the senses can branch outwards to perceive the connectedness of all other things.⁵⁰ The head of all

⁴⁹ *Centuries* 1:1, p.3.

⁵⁰ Cf. the poems *The Circulation* (especially v.3) and *Amendment* and *The Demonstration*.

things, to Traherne, is Jesus the Christ. This is the Pauline Christ, the head of ‘things in heaven and things on earth’.⁵¹

Traherne writes in so-called ‘Plain Style’. He also seems to write within an established meditative tradition, the origin of which is disputed. Some critics have traced it to continental Europe before the Reformation, at a time when Renaissance writers were revered.⁵² English ‘Plain Style’ superceded the elaborate figurative language, or dense metaphoric style, of (for example) John Donne (d.1631). The transition is evident in the poetry of George Herbert (d.1633) and perhaps in the work of Richard Crashaw (d.1649), even though Crashaw developed a penchant for a sensuous and convoluted imagery, as befitting his penchant for Baroque Catholicism. Other English poets who evinced Plain Style included Robert Herrick (d.1674), Andrew Marvell (d.1678) and Henry Vaughan (d.1695).

Traherne’s diction seems to aim at a minimum of ornamentation and allusion. Despite the regular use of abstract words and concepts, Traherne favours a relatively transparent mode, which might be called a prelapsarian or ‘pure’ way with words. It is strangely hypnotic in its overall poetic effect. For example:

All appeared New, and Strange at first, inexpressibly rare, and Delightfull,
and Beautifull. I was a little Stranger which at my Entrance into the World

⁵¹ Eph.1:10, cf. Col.1:20, NRSV.

⁵² e.g. Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, Yale University Press, revised edition, 1962.

was Saluted and Surrounded with innumerable Joys. My Knowledg was Divine.
I knew by Intuition⁵³

In claiming the use of intuition, Traherne joins Eckhart and Julian. Traherne's report of intuitional knowledge is later followed by a qualification, when he observes that he can recall his early experiences by means of 'Highest Reason'. Traherne purports to be unaware of any contradiction here. It emerges that 'Highest Reason' equates with 'intuition' in his thinking. Eckhart and Julian also believe in a kind of 'high reason' as well as the use of intuition. More than Traherne, however, Eckhart and Julian speak of revelation from God. They imply that their grasp of the content of that revelation is by means of intuition.

Imagination as a liberating power

The opening two lines of *Centuries* 3:3, below, are well known. The corn was 'orient' or brilliant; the wheat was 'immortal'.

The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped,
nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting.

Is it 'matter' that has prevented humanity's greater access to wisdom and compassion? Not according to Traherne. As these lines indicate, he has an acute experience of matter as animated by spirit. His Edenic, prelapsarian vision proceeds with specificity: dust, stones, gold, green trees. Traherne partly sees himself as delivering a spiritualized tour of childhood, with

⁵³ *Centuries* 3:2, p.110.

less metaphor than we might expect. But there is unity, for in the second line (above) Traherne unites things with the singular pronoun 'it'. In the lines below, the distinctiveness of the objects which are named is also more apparent than real:

The Dust and Stones of the Street were as Precious as GOLD.
The Gates were at first the End of the World, The Green Trees when I saw
them first through one of the Gates Transported and Ravished me;
their Sweetness and unusual Beauty made my Heart to leap,
and almost mad with Extasie, they were such strange and Wonderfull Thing:
The Men! O what Venerable and Reverend Creatures did the Aged seem!
Immortal Cherubims! And yong Men Glittering and Sparkling Angels
and Maids strange Seraphick Pieces of Life and Beauty!

The singular word 'Thing' is a synecdoche. It gathers up the two plurals of 'Trees' and 'Men' and includes all the things and values which the meditation has named to that point. Traherne is non-dualistic here; distinctions have, and are, breaking down. He uses four successive exclamation marks, by way of underlining that all are encompassed by the timelessness which is a 'quality' of God. Verbs drop away. Again, this serves to emphasize that the temporal world participates 'in' time-free infinity. These lines chime with lines in *Wonder*: 'I nothing in the World did knowe, / But 'twas Divine'. They also resonate with the closing lines of verse six of *The Salutation*: 'Into this Eden so Divine and fair, / So Wide and Bright, I com (God's) Son and Heir'.

Traherne continues:

Boys and Girles Tumbling in the Street, and Playing, were moving Jewels.
I knew not that they were Born or should Die. But all things abided Eternaly

as they were in their Proper Places. Eternity was Manifest in the Light
of the Day, and som thing infinit Behind evry thing appeared:
which talked with my Expectation and moved my Desire.
The Citie seemed to stand in Eden, or to be Built in Heaven.
The Streets were mine, the Temple was mine, the People
were mine, their Clothes and Gold and Silver was mine,
as much as their Sparkling Eys Fair Skins and ruddy faces.
The Skies were mine, and so were the Sun and Moon and Stars,
and all the World was mine, and I the only Spectator and Enjoyer of it.⁵⁴

He ‘knew not that they were Born or should Die’. Since the divine is capable of ‘exploding’ from within all entities, and since all people latently occupy timeless reality and possess infinite sight, Traherne does not see the children as trapped within the temporal round of birth and death. The poet claims to have been spoken to by the ‘infinit’. To return to the possibility of Neoplatonic influence, and to risk ruining Traherne by means of classification, it might be said that he regards the body/soul as carrying God’s original Ideal (or the original thoughts of the primal universe).⁵⁵

Obviously conscious of attempting to say the unsayable, Traherne knows that ‘the Light of the Day’ (lines 3 & 4, above) has brightly spoken; therefore he will not deny his experience and will arrange his nouns, abstract concepts and relatively unadorned style to serve a numinous (and unorthodox) vision. Diction is heightened to achieve a heightened sense of non-dualism. But a handful of pages later, his apparent recollection of childhood is less enthusiastic. The

⁵⁴ *Centuries* 3:3, p.111.

⁵⁵ It is well accepted that Neoplatonism is an enduring issue for Western theology. My three authors arguably seek to counter Neoplatonic thought, wherever this tends towards (or presumes) dualism.

numinous experience now includes a shadier side. But Traherne quickly wishes to re-establish a tone of equanimous expectation.

Another time, in a Lowering and sad Evening,
being alone in the field, when all things were dead and quiet,
a certain Want and Horror fell upon me, beyond imagination.
The unprofitableness and Silence of the Place dissatisfied me,
its Wideness terrified me, from the utmost Ends of the Earth
fears surrounded me. How did I know but Dangers
might suddainly arise from the East, and invade me
from unknown Regions beyond the Seas?
I was a Weak and little child,
and had forgotten there was a man alive in the Earth.
Yet som thing also of Hope and Expectation
comforted me from every Border.⁵⁶

The first detailed consideration of Traherne's work as mystical did not appear until almost 300 years after his death. I have in mind the book by Clements, quoted earlier, who makes reference to non-dualism in Traherne. Most surprisingly, Clements⁵⁷ believes that the *Vedāntin* assertion *Tat tvam asi* (Skt, literally *That thou art*)⁵⁸ has resonance with Traherne. As far as we

⁵⁶ *Centuries* 3:23, p.123f.

⁵⁷ *op.cit.*, p.22.

⁵⁸ Perhaps *Tat tvam asi* is better rendered, today, as 'You are That!' or 'You are It!' An interpreter of the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi writes as follows: 'What is the truth? It is that there is nothing besides the one spirit. In that there are no distinctions, even as in the honey collected by the bees there are no distinctions as *This is the honey of this flower; that is the honey of that flower*, and as in the ocean there is no dividing line between the waters of one river and those of another. ... The Self is not somewhere in a remote region, unknown and unrealized; [in the Chāndogya Upanishad] Uddalaka points at his son, Svetaketu, and proclaims *That thou art*.' (Quoted from Mahadevan, T.M.P., *Ramana Maharshi and his Philosophy of Existence*, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, 2010, p.102f.

know, Traherne had no knowledge of *Vedānta*. Yet Clements' imaginative courage leads him to the view that *Tat tvam asi* is, in effect, 'vital and basic' to Traherne.

I want to agree with Clements, despite the lack of evidence that Traherne's influences were sub-continental. Clements sees that Traherne was intent on experiential Christianity, in an age of so-called objective statements. The poet's personal vision impels him to invite the reader to go deeper than 'the isolated ... role-playing ego'.⁵⁹ By means of an astute understanding of mystically-weighted Christianity, Clements assesses Traherne's hope of 'transcending mere individuality' and attaining 'inner unity or, paradoxically, our truest individuality'.⁶⁰ The poet's childhood is presented to us as intuitively knowledgeable regarding the things of God. These things include the 'all Things' of the cosmos. Inclined by nature toward the mystical, the child soon absorbs the adult world of distancing and conceptualizing. The child then '... divides this from that, Thou from that, and distinguishes as other what in actuality is non-dual, indivisible, inextricably interrelated and interdependent'.⁶¹

Clements makes a direct comparison between Traherne and Eckhart, based on the poem *The Preparative*. The second verse is below.

Then was my Soul my only All to me,
A Living Endless Ey,
Far wider than the Skie
Whose Power, whose Act, whose Essence was to see.

⁵⁹ *op.cit.*, p.23.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.108.

I was an Inward *Sphere of Light*,
Or an Interminable Orb of *Sight*,
An Endless and a Living Day,
A *vital Sun* that round about did *ray*
All Life and Sence,
A Naked Simple Pure *Intelligence*.⁶²

According to Clements, both Traherne and Eckhart express a comparable ‘state of being’.⁶³ By this phrase, Clements means a comparable ‘condition of the soul’. He has in mind the occasion and the ‘place’ of the Eckhartian birth of God in the soul. The comparison might gain by quoting from the sixth and penultimate verse of *The Preparative*. Here, Traherne is writing of a child’s mystical experience. We know from a range of Traherne’s work, and its contexts, that the childhood is his own. He has re-imagined it; we might say he has re-imaged it. And if his childhood eyes were clear-sighted, the focus of the mature is mainly on a clear, *intuitive* sight.

Divine Impressions when they came,
Did quickly enter and my Soul inflame.
Tis not the Object, but the Light
That maketh Heaven; Tis a Purer Sight.
Felicities
Appears to none but them that purely see.⁶⁴

⁶² Ridler, p.12f.

⁶³ *op.cit.*, p.70.

⁶⁴ Ridler, p.14.

There is consonance between Trahernian light/sight and my poems *One Light, Many Lamps* and *To Your Fully Open Eyes*.⁶⁵ But in lines preceding the ones above, Traherne writes of a child's receptive state.

I was as free
As if there were nor Sin, nor Miserie.
Pure Empty Powers that did nothing loath,
Did like the fairest Glass,
Or Spotless polisht Brass,
Themselves soon in their Objects Image cloath.⁶⁶

As in Eckhart, there is the image of a mirror: either glass or polished brass. Like a mirror, the child receives 'Divine Impressions' and may reflect (and alter? or re-create?) what he or she receives. Traherne feels that, at the time of writing, he has been granted the adult sensibility to recover his childhood vision of non-duality. He can re-find the divine 'in the eternal Now-moment.'⁶⁷ As an adult, he has acquired some knowledge and a degree of wisdom, as distinct from a child's intuitive wisdom. He can therefore find the divine again; Traherne becomes didactic at the close of the poem, asking the reader to 'Get free, and so thou shalt even all Admire.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ In chapters two and four respectively.

⁶⁶ Ridler, p.13f.

⁶⁷ Clements' words, *op.cit.*, p.128.

⁶⁸ Ridler, p.14.

We do not know if Traherne was a dancer; did he accompany his patron Susanna Hopton to balls in Herefordshire? Whether or not he did, he is aware of the reciprocity of the dance, the cosmic dance. He chooses to be aware, centuries before eco-concern, of interconnectedness. He pays attention to the reciprocity of all things with everything else. And God, to Traherne, is within and without; behind and before; below and above. I have mentioned his tendency to use abstract language. In my view this is a studied use; it is intended to lure the reader into an awareness of the concrete and the particular.⁶⁹ He is a poet of full participation; he also sees the sacred everywhere, and desires to awaken me to ‘the now-moment’ of my interconnection with the divine. In the poem *The Anticipation* Traherne announces: ‘His Name is NOW’.⁷⁰ Subject and object come together again, to disclose ‘the single reality which is life, the deity’.⁷¹

As one of the very few Trahernian scholars ever to mention non-dualism, Clements is able to interpret the poet’s outlook as follows: ‘Our finite minds, our conventionalizing eye and conceptualizing psyche, perceive disordered plurality, but the timeless and spaceless Spirit seizes all things in their unity; in God’s mind everything is eternally now.’⁷² This is not necessarily to equate God with ‘Life’. Clements sees Traherne as putting forward a Neoplatonic view of ‘Thought’ or ‘Intelligence’ which functions as the substratum (or the site?) of unitive mystical experience.⁷³

⁶⁹ By the same token, theopoets perhaps tend to overlook the fact that abstract ideas can engage the imagination just as much as ‘concrete particulars’.

⁷⁰ Ridler, p.53, v. 3.

⁷¹ Clements’ words, *op.cit.*, p.162.

⁷² *ibid.*, p.165.

⁷³ Generally speaking, spiritual traditions (later regarded as ‘mystical’) have tended to configure their goal as one of unitive experience. Chapters four and five of the present study have relevance here.

There might be a parallel, here, with Eckhart's attempts to write from God's point of view. From such a standpoint, all things might constitute a singular reality. In the second verse of *The Preparative*, quoted above, we saw that Traherne declares himself to have been '... A Naked Simple Pure *Intelligence*.' And in the poem *Thoughts III* he states, near its beginning, that 'All Wisdom in a Thought doth Shine, / By Thoughts alone the Soul is made Divine'.⁷⁴ He is not suggesting that through cognitive acts humanity can literally become God. His concern here and elsewhere is more enticing. Since enlightened human 'Thoughts' are reflections of 'Thoughts' within God, this God is figured as interconnecting Living Spirit. The word 'within' occurs often in the poems. But when he advocates 'inwardness' he is not thinking of introspection, as we might conceive of it today, but something akin to 'going inward' in order to recognize the One within.⁷⁵ Thus Traherne would encourage us to experience what could be called an aware, holistic life. His own special word for this is 'Felicity'. He is preoccupied with Felicity: the remembrance of it in infancy, and the continuation, or rather, the regaining of it. Felicity is regained by means of the senses. Direct experience is supported, in due time, by the study of theology and philosophy and via literary composition.

Traherne regards himself as a participant in God's creation. He identifies his 'soul', and sometimes his 'Mind', as participating in the activity of God. He does not claim identity with

⁷⁴ Ridler, p.67.

⁷⁵ The twentieth century diary of Henri Le Saux (a.k.a. Swami Abhishiktananda, footnoted in my Introduction) includes many Patristic-like injunctions to inwardness. Dom Henri writes: 'The first task of the human being is to enter within, and himself to encounter himself. If anyone has not met himself, how could he meet God? You do not meet yourself apart from God. You do not meet God apart from yourself. ... The God adored by one who has not met himself in the nude is an idol.' Quotation from: *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (Panikkar, R., ed.) ISPCK, Delhi, 1998, p.78.

the ‘uncreated being’ or with ‘the essence’, so to say, of the traditional God. But he does claim a unity with the divine act of ‘releasing’ words which prove to be creative. One such word, prominent in Traherne, is ‘Sphere’. He can describe both God and the soul in terms of an endless sphere. The soul can be viewed as endless, everywhere; even as infinite. Traherne can describe the soul as infinite inasmuch as it lies within God’s infinity. His language is markedly non-dual.

... my Soul is an Infinit Sphere in a Centre. By this may you know
that you are infinitely Beloved: GOD hath made your Spirit a Centre
in Eternity Comprehending all: and filled all about you
in an Endless maner with infinit Riches: Which shine before you
and surround you with Divine and Heavenly Enjoyments.⁷⁶

He also can claim a unity with the divine act of seeing and loving. The mind of God and the mind of Traherne are described by the poet as being, at this point, *one*. God’s is the original love and Traherne’s is the created love. The seeing and the loving is reciprocal. In the following poem, I attempt to honour the wisdom of marsupials. Their clan-structures seem to be informed by an inner archive of creature-consciousness. Within each discrete group, the individuals appear to behave according to guiding principles. Yet they seemingly welcome me into their world, to the extent that I am detached from a compulsion to interfere (and an impulse of superiority).

⁷⁶ *Centuries* 2:80, p.96f.

So Much Light

I long for the ceiling
to yawn,
the roof to break open.
I long to step
from my clothes,
face real weather:
sky, rain
and sun full-on.
Bare feet on clay,
rough soles
conversant with soil.
I'll re-learn
a moist vocabulary,
lose myself in mute
languages: smell, taste,
sight and touch.

Stepping out,
there's broad moonlight,
enough to read
a large-print text.
Twitchy noses arrive
to read a different script;
four-legged seers shuffle
through the fence
to munch.

I am one with the in-
and exhale of all.
I crouch before things
of which my head
knows nothing
but my heart
senses
to be here.

The sub-text of poems such as this is the interdependence of matter and spirit, or the possible interconnection between macrocosm and microcosm. As I mentioned above, Traherne conceives of the divine as the interconnecting living spirit. This spirit is not separate from me; we are not two. But neither are we one, in the sense of numerically one. The corollary of this is that I am not separate from twitchy-nosed wallabies. I am also not separate from those people whom society might designate as 'evil'. We are not two; neither are we one. Traherne is interested in the recognition or recovery of union with the divine. Eckhart and Julian precede him with a parallel interest. Their non-dual reflections, especially in Eckhart's case, have proved inconvenient for religious potentates who might resist the living spirit's democratic dispensation. But such reflections have an extensive, if often concealed, history within Christianity. The ninth century Irish-born philosopher John Scottus Eriugena, influenced by neo-Platonism, could write:

.... we ought not to understand God and the creatures as two things
distinct from one another, but as one and the same. For both the creature,

by subsisting, is in God, and God, by manifesting himself,
in a marvelous and ineffable manner creates himself in creatures.⁷⁷

Such a viewpoint might be dismissed as pantheism. A more accurate characterization would be panentheism. The catch-phrase ‘everything is connected’ has a long history, both of support and of opposition. It might still be opposed by some theologians whose work fits crudely into the term ‘classically metaphysical’. On the other hand, many others are attracted to some form of panentheism.⁷⁸ Generally speaking, this view asserts that the divine works in and through a fully-connected, unitary physical universe, yet is not limited thereby. My next poem plays with creature-consciousness (and interconnecting spirit).

The Paradise Here

They ease me out of my head, these wild creatures;
they link me with real things. It’s only five o’clock,
and already three potoroos are resting their bottoms
on the courtyard tiles, deciding where to dash next.

I’d been reading about macaws,
how they understand essentials.
Flying from scattered points,
they’ll reach a distant fruiting
vine together. Their thoughts
hold true alignment; when afraid,

⁷⁷ Quoted by Moran, D., in *The Irish Mind* (Kearney, R., ed.) Wolfhound, Dublin, 1985, p.99.

⁷⁸ Such as, for example, Mark Johnston, who writes of the divine as ‘the Highest One’ and puts forward a form of process panentheism. He believes that history discloses the Highest One, the source of all existence (Johnston, M., *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2009).

their fear matches reality
and doesn't run ahead, like mine.

Wild creatures know more than they can say,
more than I can hear. They instruct me,
close to the roots of being, where every creature
is inhabited by joy, where all our days loop beyond calendars,
morph into space, combine and divide without limit.

As with *Sister Spider*, quoted earlier, the poem above might resonate with Traherne's *Thoughts*

IV. This poem of his, unusually, allows for particularities.

Fowls Fishes Beasts, Trees Herbs and precious flowers,
Seeds Spices Gums and Aromatick Bowers,
Wherwith we are enclos'd and servd, each day
By his Appointment do their Tributes pay,
And offer up themselves as Gifts of Love ...⁷⁹

Overall, the poem *Thoughts IV* is pervaded by a theme of mutuality. The implicit subject is that of the highest good: the mutual giving and receiving of communion. We are rightfully stimulated by that which we see.

An essay by James Balakier has related Traherne's work to modern phenomenology. Balakier writes of Traherne as prefiguring the work of Edmund Husserl (d.1938). Distinctively, Husserl appears to have believed that a transcendental self is accessible by means of reflection, first, on one's own consciousness and, second, on one's temporal relationships. Balakier hints that

⁷⁹ Lines 47-51 of *Thoughts IV*, Margoliouth, *op.cit.*, vol.2, p.181.

Traherne alludes to a fourth state of consciousness, one of ‘restful alertness’.⁸⁰ In my understanding, such a fourth state would parallel that of the Upanishadic *turiya*, the fourth and ‘super-conscious’ state of the *Ātmā*.⁸¹ Believing that Traherne entered a natural transcendental consciousness, a ‘threshold experience’,⁸² Balakier maintains that it was marked by ‘...an essential joy, not directly associated with reading scripture or participating in a religious ceremony, but simply present within his mind itself.’⁸³ Traherne speaks of himself as simultaneously ‘Ravished and Transported’ and ‘Doting with Delight and Ecstasy’ yet settled in ‘Repose and Perfect Rest’. These are Trahernian phrases cited by Balakier.⁸⁴ He could also have cited the ‘Secret Power’, mentioned in the poem *Thoughts I*. This ‘Power’ is represented as underlying thought.⁸⁵ It is able to bring the perpetual motion of thought into a restful order. Is it a manifestation of *Tat tvam asi*?

If a tendency of religion lies in the direction of regarding matter as completely different from spirit, the Christian story of incarnation would indicate that spirit and matter are interrelated. The failure of the church to protect the interrelation eventually led to the accusations of Nietzsche, and later Dewey, that Christianity de-energizes and distracts people from actually *doing* something about (for example) injustice. But this need not be the case. If Traherne was

⁸⁰ In ‘Traherne, Husserl, and a Unitary Act of Consciousness’ in *Re-Reading Thomas Traherne: A Collection of New Critical Essays*, Jacob Blevins (ed.), Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, AZ., 2007, p.203.

⁸¹ The other three states of the *Ātmā* (where the *Ātmā* might refer to the ‘hidden person of the heart’) are normal wakefulness, sleep with dreams, and deep, dreamless sleep. More commonly, perhaps, the *Ātmā* (or ‘the Self’ capital ‘S’) refers directly to the governing principle or substrate of life and sensation. Whatever the nuances of usage, the *Ātmā* is regarded as ultimately at one with *Brahman*.

⁸² *op cit.*, p.206.

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp.205 & 207.

⁸⁵ Ridler, p.62.

alive today, he might be imagined as adhering to an Earth-centred model of the spirit. He might be imagined as seeing the Spirit as the enfleshment of the divine within a vulnerable, teetering biosphere. Within such Earth-centred model, the universal yields to the particular. The Spirit is regarded as indwelling actual situations, actual people, in a time called Now.

This is not to conflate or confuse spirit/Spirit with matter, but to highlight their interrelation. They are inseparable, although not identical. The natural world and the spirit/Spirit coinhere. Practically, the presence of the Spirit in the world is the presence of gifts and graces for the benefit of others. In Christian terms, the Spirit is not only humanity's 'ground of being' but humanity's ground of love. This love nurtures the daily energy which constitutes humanity's life. The elaborated Patristic tradition tends to assert that you and I are, in truth, the activity of Spirit living its life *as us*. Earlier, I quoted at length from *My Spirit*, in which Traherne's diction, including his non-dual language, is markedly elevated. Here again are the opening lines of the fifth verse:

O Joy! O Wonder, and Delight!
O Sacred Myserie!
My Soul a Spirit infinit!
An Image of the Deitie!
A pure Substantiall Light! ⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Ridler, p.29.

Margaret Miles links such delight with the vision of what Plotinus called ‘the unity’. It is, of course, a vision of interconnectedness. Approaching the end of an essay with the title ‘Happiness in Motion: Desire and Delight’, Miles writes:

If, as I have claimed, happiness depends on intimate knowledge
and experience of the consanguinity of living beings,
then happiness is an art of perception, the vision of an eye that can,
and must, be cultivated. Not a vision of the heavenly city;
nor that of an imagined utopia. But now. Here. Bodied and social.
Happiness as desire and delight, delight and desire, in motion,
*active in the world.*⁸⁷

But Miles emphasizes that happiness does not just happen, but depends on vision and the experience of connectedness. I imagine that Traherne would agree. He might also say that happiness lies within the happy person, but needs to be accessed (he everywhere implies) through acts of thought (especially those of remembering) and through the discipline of writing. After lengthy preparation, which involves suffering, ‘... a Man must like a GOD, bring Light out of Darkness, and Order out of Confusion. Which we are taught to do by His Wisdom, that Ruleth in the midst of Storms and Tempests’.⁸⁸

The reader is informed that she faces an ambiguous blend of difficulty and easiness. ‘To be satisfied in God is the Highest Difficulty in the whole World And yet most easy to be don. ... the Best of all Possible Things must be wrought in God, or els we shall remain Dissatisfied.

⁸⁷ Miles, M.R., *Rereading Historical Theology*, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2008, p.49f.

⁸⁸ *Centuries* 4:21, p.180.

But it is most Easy at present, because GOD is'.⁸⁹ In part, Traherne writes from the point of view of his concept of felicity; gradually his senses (in which he includes the mind's processes) find satisfaction. The experience of felicity is one of '... repose and perfect rest'.⁹⁰ Louis Martz (1964) writes that the poet discovers his inward Paradise. But we are not informed as to precise nature of the experience.

The exact nature of this experience of 'satisfaction' remains unexpressed and, apparently, inexpressible: all we know is that Traherne has received a brilliant glimpse of the essential image toward which all these meditations have been leading, ...⁹¹

There is a partial collapse, within his writings, of the traditional duality of good and evil. This is part of his non-dual direction; Traherne shares this with Eckhart, and, to a limited degree, with Julian.⁹² Traherne knows that good and evil form a polarity in day to day life. But God transcends polarity, being infinite and therefore beyond ambiguity. In the poem *Ease*, Traherne uses the word 'intermutual'. The final four of the eight verses of *Ease* are as follows.

That all we see is ours, and evry One
Possessor of the Whole; that evry Man
Is like a God Incarnat on the Throne,
Even like the first for whom the World began;

⁸⁹ *Centuries* 3:63, p.147.

⁹⁰ *Centuries* 3:60, p.145.

⁹¹ Martz, L.L., *The Paradise Within*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CONN., 1964, p.92.

⁹² In her *Showings* (LT, Ch.27) Julian declares: '... I did not see sin.'

Whom all are taught to honor serv and love,
Because he is Belovd of God unknown;
And therefore is on Earth it self above
All others, that his Wisdom might be shewn:

That all may Happy be, Each one most Blest,
Both in Himself and others; all most High,
While all by each, and each by all possest,
Are intermutual Joys, beneath the Skie.

This shows a Wise Contrivance, and discovers
Som Great Creator Sitting on the Throne,
That so disposeth things for all his Lovers,
That evry one might reign like GOD alone.⁹³

In view of the monarchical words which Traherne uses ('throne' and 'reign') readers can be misled into overlooking the poem's radical side. For here are lines of relation: of self and other, of God and self, and of God and other. Traherne presents what he considers to be the highest human good: the mutual giving and receiving of communion and, therefore, felicity. The radical side of *Ease* has been alluded to throughout this chapter; namely, that I *become myself* through the awareness of *the other*. It is this experiential dimension of theology which underlies my attempt, below, to honour the wisdom tradition.

⁹³ Ridler, p.35f.

To Sophia

*We speak of Sophia;
she is found neither in the unreal aspect of the world
nor in the rulers of the unreal aspect.
We speak of the mystery of Sophia,
foreordained from the beginning for our bliss.*

- 1 Cor. 2: 6 & 7 (author's paraphrase)

Wherever I go,
you are there too:
nearer than air, closer
than teeth or hair,
you are not separate from me
yet I am not you. Deeper
than thought or feeling:
your life in mine,
my life in yours. You teach me
how to be aware
of who I am. Hidden in yours,
my life will be as human as it can.
I'll praise each open face,
the naturalness
of grace; I'll praise that everyday
occurrence, the mystery
of your presence.

Perhaps this poem is really about self-awareness, as indeed Traherne's poem *Ease* could be. The subject-object relation is breaking down; 'the Thou' is not necessarily 'other'. Such poems

as these carry the risk of too much egocentricity, not to mention hectoring. Or so it might seem from these lines in part two of Traherne's *Insatiableness*.

This busy, vast, enquiring Soul
Brooks no Controul,
No Limits will endure,
Nor any Rest: It will all see,
Not Time alone, but ev'n Eternity.
What is it? Endless sure.⁹⁴

The poet also claims much for his own soul in *Thoughts IV*, quoted earlier. We are given to believe that by means of mere thought, his soul can inhabit all the ages. Apparent hubris is balanced by vast, capitalized abstractions: 'Eternal', 'Joys', 'Wisdom', 'Love', 'Glory', 'Goodness'. As unpoetic as these words might be, they are Traherne's 'double vision' at work. Vast nouns signal his awareness that apparently ordinary events or things can be momentous. The 'large words' are somewhat scattered or shattered within his deep love for the quotidian.

Whereas current sensibility has decreed that poems should be crafted in 'concrete' words, Traherne is drawn to theopoetic fusions of abstraction and plain speaking. *Thoughts IV* emphasizes that we are able to love things when we have seen them properly. The poem ends with something of a vision of God; sight and love combine. Line 83 states that 'His Omnipresence is all Sight and Love'.⁹⁵ Traherne had pre-figured this conclusion at the start of

⁹⁴ Lines 1-6, Margoliouth, *op.cit.*, vol.2, p.146.

⁹⁵ *op.cit.*, p.182.

Thoughts IV, by quoting a (slightly faulty) version of Ps. 16:11. In the KJV which Traherne used, the verse runs as follows: ‘Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.’ The poet sees communion between bodies, souls and spirits (which include unseen presences, here and ‘elsewhere’) devolving into communion with the divine. A living temple is created within the poet: ‘... a Living one within the Mind’.⁹⁶ His apparent Neolatonism re-enters the picture: the souls of those who have been purified are ‘... transformed to a Thought’.⁹⁷ This lines takes its place in the concluding lines of *Thoughts IV*:

O give me Grace to see thy face, and be
 A constant Mirror of Eternitie.
 Let my pure Soul, transformed to a Thought,
 Attend upon thy Throne, and as it ought
 Spend all its Time in feeding on thy Lov,
 And never from thy Sacred presence mov.
 So shall my Conversation ever be
 In Heaven, and I O Lord my GOD with Thee! ⁹⁸

The poet’s soul, which had inhabited the cosmos by means of thoughts, becomes ‘a Thought’. He is thereby in God’s presence, in ‘Conversation’ with God, but still aware that no ‘absolute answers’ will be forthcoming. As I try to infer in the following poem, this scarcely matters.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, line 88, p.182.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, line 97, p.182.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, lines 95-102, p.182.

Sophian Song

Beyond word
and concept
there's no answer

but a void.
In the void
a fuller

answer
means no answer
but a spectre:

let's call her
Sophia, or *Wise Other*,
to be proper

or traditional,
it doesn't matter.
Does she sleep

with me
in basement
bed-sits,

sleep with generator-
throb, vertical drop
of other folks'

effluvia,
pipe-hammer?
As dawn comes up

over tenements
and smoke hovers
low in heavy wisps,

do I begin to see:
Sophia, you're not other,
you're us, you're me, you're Mother?

The divine seems inclined to conversation; the subject/object relation is dialogical rather than dualistic. The sign of Logos is to the fore in Traherne; the sign of Wisdom is to the fore in my own work. Under either sign, the divine is felt to remain open to every creaturely response of openness. Traherne treats openness, in *Thoughts IV*, as both dialogical and devotional; I hope that I do the same. Devotion, surrender, yieldedness: the freely chosen joys/pains of asceticism are with a view to further openness or clearer 'sight'. There is mutual reciprocity. I will return to this in chapter three, when discussing Julian. In chapter five, reciprocity will be to the fore when discussing the pluralism of Raimon Panikkar.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ The book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) speaks of the necessity of reciprocal responses. 'She will reveal herself; once you hold her, do not let her go. For in the end you will find rest in her and she will take the form of joy for you' (Sir. 6:27-28, NJB).

An 'eternal Correspondence'

The open-hearted Traherne was perhaps a freer, less doctrinaire individual than some of the Calvinists with whom he was obliged to interact. Stanley Stewart (1970) affirms that a glance at Traherne's poems persuades the reader of the man's sweet disposition. More to the point, Stewart recognizes that the poet's thought moves outward in an open way, creating the impression that his body/mind/soul is coexistent with all other beings, on earth and in heaven. Stewart writes of Traherne's theme as one of re-integration preceded by a necessary disintegration '... as the boundaries of self and other, of subject and object, become more and more attenuated'.¹⁰⁰ Stewart's book served for decades as a rare summation of Traherne's legacy. It concludes by seeming to adopt the poet's perspective.

Man's ultimate alienation from the world is felt most tragically in the loss of the sense of his identity with others. From such a death in life man can and must be resurrected: the poetic sequences culminate in visionary glimpses of the kingdom in which man's reconciliation to the world is complete. The soul is transfigured by a process of divine narcissism into a being able to love himself – his humanity – in others; the speaker is able to see in the glow of other men's faces the reflection of his own and God's love.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Stewart, S., *The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne*, Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, CA, 1970, p.205.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.214.

Traherne's *ouvre* is redolent with the cosmic dance of connectedness. But also, at a personal level, he evinces a *felt sense* of identification with others. Perhaps, today, it is not an absence of 'objective' identification with others that is an issue, so much as the lack of a felt sense of trans-identification. Perhaps an absence of feeling has fed a fantasy of what could be called 'separativity'. This is a theme in my following poem.

On a Day of Still Heat

In the still heat
 a breadfruit ripens:
a multitude of tiny sunspots
 mounted on hexagonal platelets,
green leather skin
 and flesh of kneadable custard.

In the breadfruit
 is hidden the sun,
in the sun
 the breadfruit.
Before the heat reaches Earth,
 the flames have already died;
before being picked,
 the breadfruit is already rotten.

And all the unpurchaseable luxuries
 - beetles, thunder, pebbles, twigs -
whose lives say, simply,
 I *accept*,

are hidden in each other
and hide all things.

In a book with the pointed title *Thomas Traherne: Mystic and Poet*, Keith Salter is absorbed by what he calls Traherne's 'illumination'. Salter believes that Traherne had reached '... the realization within him of a secret self, a self which is at the same time infinite and universal'.¹⁰² The poems which might best exemplify this realization are *My Spirit* and *The Preparative*. Salter refers to Traherne's 'sense of his unlimited power to become the very object of his contemplation'.¹⁰³ He proceeds as follows.

As the distinction between body and spirit disappears,
so likewise is Traherne unable to distinguish between what is objective
and what is subjective. ... He creates and is created by the world
around him, the world which seems to flow through him.
The terms internal and external which are useful on ordinary levels
of consciousness cease to be valid for him.
The simplicity of this state of being, his 'naked, simple, pure intelligence',
stands clearly for an absence of all dualism, a positive sense of unity
in which the distinctions of spirit and sense, mind and body,
subject and object become subordinate to an overriding conviction
of an essentially mutual relationship existing between apparently
individual and separate entities.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Salter, K.W., *Thomas Traherne: Mystic and Poet*, Edward Arnold, London, 1964, p.64f.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.65.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.66.

This is a rare allusion in the literature on Traherne to his non-dualism. It is often overlooked. I have shown that he includes a degree of non-duality between God and humanity. More evident, at times, is a non-duality between body/soul and between the individual self and other entities. His readers receive an impression that spiritual growth occurs, not through will-power, but through non-dual imagination and awareness. Eckhart is similar in this respect, whereas Julian is more overtly devotional in her understanding of growth, while including imaginative awareness. But is not inner growth *always* a question of awareness? The texture of awareness is difficult to describe; it is not helpful to blandly regard it as the perception of everything without boundaries. An understanding of ‘emptiness’ (Skt. *śūnyatā* ¹⁰⁵) can form part of an acceptance that there is no such thing as an essential or enduring ‘self’. In ‘pure awareness’ it is held that the sense of *inner* and *outer* no longer applies. Traherne’s view of infinite love takes him to a similar openness. In the opening sections of *Centuries* 3, he perhaps comes closest to an autobiographical account. False values have been instilled in the child; an awareness of another world, another creation, has to be re-learned. But as far as *this* world is concerned, his poems invite us to *absorb* it. Since infinite love has orchestrated the world, what else would be appropriate? He even declares that ‘you’, 2nd person singular, are ‘the Sole Heir of the whole World’.¹⁰⁶ This ‘engaged mysticism’ is Trahernian; it contrasts with (for example) the mysticism of John of the Cross and others both Catholic and Protestant who favour the soul’s *retreat* from the world.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ *Śūnyatā* literally means ‘voidness’ or ‘emptiness’. It implies non-substantiality. Accordingly, *śūnyatā* cannot be conceptualized or objectified, or else it becomes ‘something’ which one conceives and represents as ‘*śūnyatā*’! I favour the word ‘openness’ as a possible rendering of the Skt. Chapter four includes a discussion of parallels between *śūnyatā* and *kenosis*.

¹⁰⁶ *Centuries* 1:29 p.15.

¹⁰⁷ In an early essay, David J. Tacey writes the following: ‘We are creatures of two worlds, of this world and an otherworld. The conflict between the separate demands of these worlds is what defines and constitutes our human experience.’ Tacey goes

Traherne's idea of spiritual nourishment begins with the enjoyment of life's temporal, material gifts. His register or hallmark of spiritual inclination and maturity is the extent of such enjoyment. Transcendence which is out-of-this-world does not attract him, notwithstanding his exultant paeans to a childhood which seems, at times, to float free of everything dismal. But Traherne is not a naïve sentimentalist who is fixated on nature, although he regards all of nature as deeply significant in the quest to find joy within immanent terms.¹⁰⁸ In his apparent acceptance of the human body as a unity (of spirit with matter) he adheres to a union of grace and nature which was more widespread in the era of Julian and Eckhart. He is able to represent himself as having felt an inward, bodily experience of the Infinite One. Nothing pertaining to himself, *per se*, is infinite, yet he feels inwardly embraced by infinitude. Indeed, Traherne regards all things as included in the Infinity which is God. A principle of oneness applies, no matter what the scale.

Breathing Boulder

I once knew a woman
who collected fragments
from French cathedral walls.

on to characterize the conflict as between Logos and Eros. He then proceeds: 'The 'solution' which dismisses Logos, or which dresses up the erotic gods as 'spirit', is no solution at all, but represents a mere regression to an archaic 'unity' which excludes contemporary consciousness and all the great gains that have been made by the human spirit under the tutelage of a Father God.' Quotation from: 'Spirit, Nature and Popular Ecology: An Archetypal Critique of the New Paganism' *Quadrant*, July-August 1992, pp 67-70. Tacey has since published expositions of contemporary consciousness.

¹⁰⁸ It can be assumed that Traherne was acquainted with the writings of Sir Thomas Browne (d.1682). Browne's book *Religio Medici* ('Religion of a Physician') speaks of the 'two books from whence I collect my Divinity.' These are the book of scripture and the book of 'Nature'. Browne states that '...those that never saw Him in the one, have discovered Him in the other' (*Religio Medici* 1:16).

She claimed they cleaned the air,
which she could hear,
glistening,
on windless nights.

Sensing a subtle joy,
I called her *Balmy*,
although her carbuncular skin
was anything but placid.

Each morning, she liberated moths
trapped behind glass,
picked up earthworms
before they steamed to pretzels
on the path, shook ants from cut gladioli.

Balmy took me bushwalking
to see a certain boulder:
lichen-spotted, bull-shouldered.

I looked until I saw,
or thought I saw,
an infinitesimal
rise and fall:

igneous passion in motion,
stabilised for an aeon
and now stilled,
or perhaps not.

I felt part of a backdrop
of presence,
as if all things participated
in a gossamered influence,
a cloud of utterance.

In the poem above, I intended to follow Traherne's mode of writing a 'mystical' poem that is actually grounded in very ordinary life, in what Traherne calls '...your Walk and Table.'¹⁰⁹ If the participatory 'cloud of utterance' has everyday relevance for us, it will be an *embodied* relevance. Along this vein, the Christian declaration (*kerygma*) is both an announcement and a celebration of present-time liberty. The *kerygma* does not concern itself with proposing a more convenient life in a body-free sector of the cosmos. Traherne claims and exudes an experience of liberty. He develops the consequences of the Eckhartian birth of the divine in the soul. We might imagine Traherne imagining Eckhart. In front of the poet is a 14th manuscript which seems to contain a radical perspective. If it is radical, it is also grounded in a traditional hermeneutic of the Gospel. Eckhart conveys to Traherne that what matters most is the birth of God in the soul. In developing the consequences of God's birthing, Traherne's senses are heightened. He wants our senses to be heightened also.

By the very Right of your Sences, you Enjoy the World.
Is not the Beauty of the Hemisphere present to your Ey?
Doth not the Glory of the Sun pay Tribut to your Sight?
Is not the Vision of the WORLD an Amiable Thing? ...¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ *Centuries* 1:30, p.15.

¹¹⁰ *Centuries* 1:21, p.11.

You never Enjoy the World aright, till the Sea it self floweth
in your Veins; till you are Clothed with the Heavens,
and Crowned with the Stars: and Perceiv your self to be the Sole
Heir of the whole World: and more than so, becaus Men are in it
who are evry one Sole Heirs, as well as you. Till you can Sing
and Rejoyce and Delight in GOD, as Misers do in Gold,
and Kings in Scepters, you never Enjoy the World.¹¹¹

Till your Spirit
filleth the whole World, and the Stars are your Jewels,
till you are as Familiar with the Ways of God in all Ages
as with your Walk and Table.¹¹²

Traherne's use of 'spirit' is different from that of Eckhart or Julian. He seems to elide the divine Spirit with the human spirit. Living in the religiously diverse seventeenth century, Traherne was able to write without the constraining pressure of a monolithic, inquisitorial church behind his shoulder. He does indeed 'cut loose', so to speak, in the expressions of his 'authentic self'. It is as a body that Traherne has 'come to share in the very being of God'. It is not as a disembodied spirit but within his body that he shares '...the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16 REB). In the words of Gregory of Nyssa, he begins to see 'with the eyes of the Dove'. Actual, literal doves are not concerned with finitude and mortality, so far as we can gather. A feathered dove does dove-things, in a real-time dove-body. If it is a female dove, she will

¹¹¹ *Centuries* 1:29, p.15.

¹¹² *Centuries* 1:30, *ibid.*

probably reason her way to creating a small platform of softish twigs. Her concern is not with mortality but with natality. We imagine dove-desire; it connects with another real-time dove; their creativity is this-worldly. How does this relate to Traherne? The theme is the same: it is *newness now* that matters! Here is the opening verse of *Wonder*:

How like an Angel came I down!
How Bright are all Things here!
When first among his Works I did appear
O how their GLORY me did Crown?
The World resembled his *Eternitie*,
In which my Soul did Walk;
And evry Thing that I did see,
Did with me talk.¹¹³

Traherne dispenses with time and figures his childhood and his present and future life as resembling '*Eternitie*'. The reason for this does not become clear until the close of verse three: 'I nothing in the World did knowe, / But 'twas Divine.' This reads like an epiphany of Realization; not surprising, therefore, that '... evry Thing that I did see, / Did with me talk'. Traherne is not crediting a personal achievement of enlightenment; instead (again in verse three) he praises the infinite One: 'I felt a Vigour in my Sence / That was all SPIRIT'. He uses 'Sence' generically; it stands for each one of his five senses. He reminds us elsewhere that it is 'som thing infinit Behind evry thing' which talks with him.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ridler, p.6.

¹¹⁴ *Centuries* 3:3, p.111.

But Traherne knows that Infinity cannot be an object of understanding or experiencing. He is writing paradoxically and theopoetically. He is saying, in effect: 'I experience the collapse of the subject-object relation, in the Now.' When he writes of 'the Now' his diction sounds modern. He wants to expand our consciousness, so that we feel an identity with the divine. The isolated 'I' is not the real 'I'. The genuine 'I' is on intimate terms with 'the Almighty'. In later chapters I will return to the notion of the false self. But the reason for doing so will be to placard the concept of 'the Self' (capital 'S'). The *Advaitic* understanding is that we are all expressions of 'the Self' (capital 'S'), without loss of Oneness.

In keeping with his own vision of Oneness, Traherne recapitulates an infancy that was inseparable from 'Eternitie'. Unequivocally, he wants us to grasp that God's pristine creation was 'present to him'. It is a non-dual recounting of a beatific state. The poem *Wonder* continues:

The Skies in their Magnificence,
The Lively, Lovely Air;
Oh how Divine, how soft, how Sweet, how fair!
The Stars did entertain my Sence,
And all the Works of GOD so Bright and pure,
So Rich and Great did seem,
As if they must endure,
In my Esteem.

A Native Health and Innocence
 Within my Bones did grow,
 And while my GOD did all his Glories shew,
 I felt a Vigour in my Sence
 That was all SPIRIT. I within did flow
 With Seas of Life, like Wine;
 I nothing in the World did knowe,
 But 'twas Divine.¹¹⁵

No distinction is discerned between his spirit and the 'Seas of Life'. Indeed, there is no distinction drawn with the '... all Things here' of verse one. Traherne raises his Edenic non-dual vision to an explicit level. About three centuries earlier, Eckhart had expressed his theological certainty of our potential *union* with God. And almost four centuries before Traherne, Julian had aligned the soul with *participation* in both the sufferings of Christ and the resurrected glory of Christ. For Traherne, 'all Things' (including 'The Skies' and 'The Lively, Lovely Air' and 'The Stars' of verse two of *Wonder*) combine to nourish a non-dual perspective. He has a sense of greatly reduced separation. In the poem *The Salutation* the unitary tendency is again prominent. 'The Earth, the Seas, the Light, the Day, the Skies, / The Sun and Stars are mine; if those I prize.'¹¹⁶ He then confidently announces: 'Into this Eden so Divine and fair, / So Wide and bright, I com (God's) Son and Heir'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Ridler, p.7.

¹¹⁶ Ridler, p.6.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

To be a daughter or son of God is to hold an ‘Eternal Correspondence’ with the divine.¹¹⁸ Since Traherne regards the soul as infinite, his word ‘Correspondence’ has ontological as well as epistemological implications. He grants: ‘Few will believ the Soul to be infinit: yet Infinit is the first Thing which is naturally Known. Bounds and Limits are Discerned only in a Secondary maner’.¹¹⁹ He is confident that a child of the Father hears the Father talking with him. ‘Eternity was Manifest in the Light of the Day, and som thing infinit Behind evry thing appeared: which talked with my Expectation and moved my Desire’.¹²⁰ The effect is conveyed that Traherne believes that the divine God speaks to him, within the inherent desires and expectations of his own spirit.

A radical economic theory is presented in verse six of *Wonder*. Traherne proposes a non-acquisitive, non-possessive economy.

Rich Diamond and Pearl and Gold
 In evry Place was seen;
 Rare Splendors, Yellow, Blew, Red, White and Green,
 Mine Eyes did everywhere behold,
 Great Wonders clothd with Glory did appear,
 Amazement was my Bliss.
 That and my Wealth was evry where:
 No Joy to this! ¹²¹

¹¹⁸ *Centuries* 4:70, p.205.

¹¹⁹ *Centuries* 2:81, p.97.

¹²⁰ *Centuries* 3:3, p.111.

¹²¹ Ridler, p.8.

He has already proposed an ecological practice based on inherent worth. This comes in the concluding lines of verse three: ‘I nothing in the World did knowe, / But ‘twas Divine.’¹²² He has also, in the opening line of the same verse, staked a claim of ‘A Native Health and Innocence’¹²³ This is naïve, on any superficial assessment. But, it is Traherne’s way of adumbrating his view that all things enjoy a participatory share in the divine. The elements and colours, in the verse above, help to comprise the ‘Splendors’. These, in turn, are part of ‘my Bliss’. But (and here again is Traherne’s non-dualism) everything is subsumed in ‘Joy’ which is both transcendent and immanent. The poet is passionately dissolving distinctions. In effect, he wishes to say to the reader: ‘This is your reality. This is where you will find your true nature.’

In the seventh and penultimate verse of *Wonder*, Traherne’s expressions of the undivided nature of the cosmos are mitigated by an awareness of this-worldly divisions. Here is one of Traherne’s rare elaborations on sin.

Cursed and Devised Properties,
 With Envy, Avarice
 And Fraud, those Fiends that Spoyl even Paradice,
 Fled from the Splendor of mine Eys.
 And so did Hedges, Ditches, Limits, Bounds,
 I dreamed not ought of those,

¹²² Ridler, p.7.

¹²³ *ibid.*

But wanderd over all mens Grounds,
And found Repose.

The final verse returns to the unified vision.

Properties themselvs were mine,
And Hedges Ornaments;
Walls, Boxes, Coffers, and their rich Contents
Did not Divide my Joys, but shine.
Clothes, Ribbans, Jewels, Laces, I esteemd
My Joys by others worn;
For me they all to wear them seemd
When I was born.¹²⁴

Superficially, here is an idiosyncratic narcissist, placing himself uppermost within every trope. But the 'For me', of the penultimate line, means 'to' me. Traherne indicates that his individuality has not been dissolved, and yet, all the 'Joys' are shared. On his view, all people are within the divine and can choose to share 'an eternal Correspondence' in the partnership of universal participation.

The world as Christ's body

In the literature on Traherne, references to his non-duality are surprisingly rare. A recent book which offers an otherwise exemplary study of his theology fails to make mention of it. This, despite the fact that non-dualism functions as a 'thematic arc' throughout Traherne's work. The

¹²⁴ Ridler, p.8.

book in question, by Denise Inge (2009)¹²⁵ does contain a smattering of references to ‘union with God’. It might be relevant to state that Inge is a committed member of the Church of England, is married to a bishop and has lived in the small palaces still allocated in the U.K. to some bishops. Can I crassly suggest that if Inge had engaged with the non-dualism of Jesus, as taken up by Traherne with exuberance, it might be tantamount to guiding a torpedo towards the cruise ship of the C of E?

Inge takes aim at Trahernian scholars who have preceded her. She states that ‘Critics ... are right to note the unitive urge in Traherne’s writings. ... The danger, however, of such a loose understanding of oneness in Traherne is that it can easily slip into a kind of fusing of all things into one indistinguishable sameness; God and the great oneness become synonymous. God is not a person at all but a kind of overarching unity, a concept’.¹²⁶ Here I consider that Inge is fenced in by the language and symbols of her tradition. As it happens, Traherne was within the same tradition. Yet he was able to take its symbols, signs and motifs and to move beyond them.

Inge proceeds to remark that within a unitive model, Traherne is effectively a Neoplatonist. So saying, she feels justified in largely ignoring the poetry. It should be said that Inge set out to write a study of Traherne’s theology and has admirably done so. But a theopoet would wish to state that all theologies are forms of imaginative representation; as such, they include theopoetics by nature of the case. For her part, Inge manifests a disingenuous reluctance to attend to

¹²⁵ Inge, D., *Wanting like a God: Desire and Freedom in Thomas Traherne*, SCM Press, London, 2009.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p.179f.

paradox and to the way in which antinomies can be put forward which are *both* true, but in different senses, and which might be brought into proximity, if not harmony.

Referring to his large body of prose writings, including recent discoveries, Inge finds that ‘Desire percolates throughout his writings’.¹²⁷ She calls Traherne’s theology a ‘... theology of desire’.¹²⁸ Insofar as this side of Traherne has gone unremarked, Inge offers a fresh assessment. She writes:

His deep exploration of desire and its place in the heart of God
and thereby in the heart of Christianity is perhaps the most significant
theological contribution he has made. ... Felicity is not about regaining
childhood innocence, or about deferring happiness to an afterlife,
or about negating or subjugating the plethora of human desires.
Because desire exists in God, felicity is about living in lack and longing,
being simultaneously needy and filled. Final fullness *is* this interplay
of want and satisfaction, heaven here and hereafter,
having and wanting from and into eternity.¹²⁹

This is expositional theology taking its commendable, rightful form of imaginative representation. But does Inge see Traherne as an advocate of the unitive mystery? What about his experiential non-dualism? Inge goes on to write: ‘... we may understand Traherne’s felicity not as an achieved state but as a participation in the dynamic of desire and satisfaction that for

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p.264.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p.263.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, p.246.

him marks the relationship of God and the soul.’¹³⁰ The recognition of desire here is obviously commendable but I wonder at the possibility of an implied trivialization of an older tradition, which does not dismiss desire but seeks, through mindfulness and compassion, to remedy the violence that is a common result of desire.

In an unpublished thesis Alison Kershaw specifically uses the term non-dualism, albeit in passing references. This is justifiable, given that her thesis is a detailed analysis of Traherne’s prose work *The Kingdom of God*.¹³¹ Kershaw mentions Traherne’s ‘subversion of dualism’.¹³² She briefly discusses the implicit connection, in Traherne, ‘... between Christ and all things’.¹³³ The Logos is ‘... at the core of every being’.¹³⁴ Since the poet understands Christ to be the Logos, each human being can be configured as a co-possessor of the world. Traherne, as I have mentioned, begins *Centuries* by individualizing this trope. It is *you*, singular, who inherits the world. For example:

Is it not a Great Thing, that you should be Heir of the World?
Is it not a very Enriching Veritie? In which the Fellowship of the Mystery,
which from the beginning of the World hath been hid in GOD,
lies concealed! The Thing hath been from the Creation of the World,
but hath not so been Explained, as that the interior Beauty should be understood.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, p.262.

¹³¹ Alison Kershaw, *The Poetic of the Cosmic Christ in Thomas Traherne’s The Kingdom of God*, PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2005. Kershaw finds Christology to be ‘deeply embedded’ (p.14) in Traherne’s work. This had not generally been acknowledged.

¹³² *ibid.*, p.2.

¹³³ *ibid.*, p.7.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p.8.

It is my Design therefore in such a Plain maner to unfold it,
that my Friendship may appear, in making you Possessor of the Whole World.¹³⁵

Traherne's vision is unitary; in a sense the world is construed as Christ's body. Thereby, a customary duality between 'earth' and 'heaven' is collapsed. In Kershaw's words, '... heaven is present on earth and earth is celebrated in heaven'.¹³⁶ With a surprising and fruitful touch, Kershaw brings Traherne into proximity with Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (d.1955). She writes that Traherne and Teilhard share a view that the Kingdom of God is 'present'.¹³⁷ More than that, they emphasize a union of the material and the divine by sharing what amounts to a 'realized eschatology'. The Kingdom is less a futuristic anticipation than something already realized through Christ's incarnation.

In a viewpoint that would run counter to that of Inge (above) Alan Gould¹³⁸ favours retaining felicity as a key to Traherne's theopoetics. Felicity, writes Gould, is derived from true perception rather than personal acquisition. It is true perception which enables covetousness to be disarmed; the active engagement of the senses can permit a genuine ownership which manifests as self-possession. Gould is drawn to Traherne's exalted view of humanity, a quality unusual in Christians of Gould's acquaintance. He writes of Traherne as an 'exhilarated witness' of intimacy 'between the One and the All'. Gould believes that Traherne 'takes for his

¹³⁵ *Centuries* 1:3, p.3f.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p.288.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, p.17.

¹³⁸ Alan Gould, 'The Poet of Sudden Cloudbreak: a Commentary on Thomas Traherne', *Quadrant*, March 2008.

underlying situation' the idea of a threshold. That is to say, Traherne signals his awareness that temporal constraints have only served to heighten his apprehension of '... an ampler sense of the real'. According to Gould this poet-theologian enjoys presenting his poetic arguments from the threshold of the human and the divine; from what I might call the divinely human.

Gould notes that Traherne can be 'intently self-regarding'. He adds: '... but this is because the poet's buoyant egotism is vital to his project, which is to disclose how the essential wonder of Creation is the way the presence of the All comes to be concentrated in the attentive powers of the One. Here is one of the profound attractions of any faith, and at one level it little matters whether that One is Deity, or TT himself.' Gould's appraisal carries the refreshing perspective of a writer with no prior commitment to Traherne's religious assumptions. The following extract (verse five) from *The Improvment* is corroborative.

His Wisdom, Goodness, Power, as they unite
All things in one, that they may be the *Treasures*
Of one *Enjoy'r*, shine in the utmost Height
They can attain; and are most Glorious *Pleasures*,
When all the Univers conjoynd in one,
Exalts a Creature, as if that alone.¹³⁹

Is it a matter of letting the One who 'unite(s) All things in one' (lines 1 & 2, above) speak through our embodiment? To put it another way, is it a matter (the matter) of creating the embodied poem of ourselves? Would such an unprintable poem be the poem of the self within the Self? Would it be the imprint of the divine?

¹³⁹ Ridler, p.18.

A perichoretic cosmos

Traherne's confidence in his vision can be disconcerting, especially when he conveys his feeling of being imbued with 'Truth' and 'Love' from birth.¹⁴⁰ These are traditional nouns, often employed to denote God. Although his 'Infant Soul', admittedly, did not comprehend the greatest truths, it nonetheless possessed them. The 'most Enriching Truths' were within his soul.¹⁴¹ There is, therefore, the expression of a latent union with God. Traherne does not use the words 'non-dual'. As mentioned earlier, he uses the Plain Style of the period and combines it with the established meditative tradition. His often unadorned language might be said to mimic the way in which he envisages the Creator declaring the plain Word of creation. The opening lines of *Centuries* 3:2 were quoted earlier. Here is a further extract:

I Knew Nothing of Sickness or Death, or Exaction,
in the Absence of these I was Entertained
like an Angel with the Works of GOD in their Splendor and Glory;
I saw all in the Peace of Eden; Heaven and Earth did sing my
Creator's Praise, and could not make more Melody to Adam,
then to me. All Time was Eternity, and a Perpetual Sabbath.
Is it not Strange, that an Infant should be Heir of the World,
and see those Mysteries which the Books of the Learned never unfold? ¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ *Centuries* 1:1, p.3.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *Centuries* 3:2, p.110f.

As in the writing above, the unpromising repetition of abstract words does not destroy the readerly sense that Traherne lived a passionate life. His metaphysics might be out of favour today. We are nervous about assumptions and schemes that purport to look for truth in abstract propositions, without due reference to the conversational contexts which we now feel to be indispensable. But Traherne's use of absolute statements and abstract concepts is not a pious reiteration of received positions, whether biblical or institutional. It is one of the strategies of his religious imagination. He wants to point to the significance of human beings with all five senses 'operating'. By means of our senses, he wants us to apprehend the mystery of creation and of redemption. My senses (as Traherne everywhere implies) will unite with grace to allow me to enter the felicity of Paradise while here on Earth. His position is this: nature is inherently worthy and worth attending to, for its own sake. Nature is also the forecourt on Earth of the full manifestation, in the age to come, of the Kingdom of God. But the human spirit can exult in Earth-centred joy. This joy points to the Spirit, and to the joy which is Trinitarian. But it is nonetheless experientially real and located Earth-wise.

The awareness of essential unity can sometimes be mitigated by a resurgence of factors which generate a sense of individualized possessiveness. But not for long; Traherne quickly reverts to a favourite word: 'Joy'. Together with 'Delight' and 'Love', the word 'Joy' spirals up the poems and the prose to his preferred tip of 'Felicity'. Perhaps he was weary of encountering Christians who evinced the sense that God, somehow, did not approve of them. In the fourth *Century* he addresses such a disjunction, by indirect means, when he refers to self-hurt or self-bereavement.

From His Lov all the Things in Heaven and Earth flow unto you;
but if you lov neither Him nor them, you bereav your self of all,
and make them infinitely evil and Hurtfull to you and your self abominable.
So that upon your Lov naturally depends your own Excellency
and the Enjoyment of His. It is by your Lov that you enjoy all His Delights,
and are Delightfull to Him.¹⁴³

His observation of negativity is a cause for *angst*. As with Eckhart and Julian, he has a pastoral intention. He wants all people to know they are ‘Delightfull’ to divine eyes. The opening sections of *Centuries* are always helpful, if we wish to understand Traherne’s context and intention. He confidently reports that God delights in him.

To know God is to know Goodness; It is to see the Beauty
of infinit Lov... . Whatever knowledge else you have of God,
it is but Superstition. ... He is not an Object of Terror, but Delight.
To know Him therefore as He is, is to frame the most Beautifull
Idea in all Worlds. He Delighteth in our Happiness more than we:
and is of all other the most Lovly Object.¹⁴⁴

Later, in the third *Century*, Traherne uses the term ‘Enlarged Soul’. A person whose soul is enlarged is compared to a fountain, of which God is the source. The fountain bursts out with love. This love is returned to God; it is also conveyed to all creatures, destroying boundaries in order to establish unity. Boundaries between the self and the other become attenuated. Discussing the poem *Shadows in the Water*, Stewart writes as follows: ‘A proper

¹⁴³ *Centuries* 4:48, p.193.

¹⁴⁴ *Centuries* 1:17, p.9.

understanding of the world and the imitation of the divine self-love are one and the same thing. The truth emanating from the world is that love annihilates the boundaries between the self and the other¹⁴⁵

Traherne's 'Enlarged Soul', with its quality of boundlessness, harmonizes both wisdom and compassion within itself. Originating in God, the soul has a share in the divine, embracing all of the world's beings in wise love and compassion. It appears that the soul will eventually be immersed in, or perhaps absorbed by, God's infinite life. The first verse of Traherne's six verse poem *Goodnesse* includes the following lines.

The Face of GOD is Goodness unto all,
And while he Thousands to his Throne doth call,
While Millions bathe in Pleasures,
And do behold his Treasures,
The Joys of all
On mine do fall
And even my Infinitie doth seem
A Drop without them of a mean Esteem.¹⁴⁶

To further develop Traherne's position, it is the *perichoretic* nature of relations between the traditional 'persons' of the Trinity which engenders a joy which is based here on Earth. The invisible dancing within the divine is reflected in our interconnected human relations of

¹⁴⁵ Stewart, S., *op.cit.*, p.154.

¹⁴⁶ Ridler, p.75.

reciprocity and gladness. In this way, Traherne sees all humanity as participating in the reinstatement of the divine image. For example, the interpenetration of the the divine ‘persons’ might be seen in the accountability of one human being for the next human being and of one community for the next community. In other words, our behaviour as persons is *perichoretic*. In Christian parlance, our actions are those of agapeic love, expressed from body to body; to and from your body and mine. It takes place between, within and among all persons and all other creatures within their contexts. On this existential or process-oriented interpretation, the traditional teachings regarding Trinity (and regarding incarnation) have on-going value. Especially so, if and when these teachings are rescued from the weight of an excessively gendered history and emerge as, literally, holy/wholly communion.

Turning now to the style in which Traherne expresses passionate ‘Lov’ for all things, the reader cannot avoid a constant use of capital letters. But these might unexpectedly foster empathy with his passion. The writing below is taken from a long, didactic meditation which is cast in a superficially poetic form. Its title is ‘Thanksgivings for the Blessedness of his LAWS’.

The SUN is a glorious Light,
 Whose Beams are most Welcom, Necessary, Useful,
 To me and all the Sons of Men;
 But thy Laws surpass the light of the Sun,
 As much as that of a Gloe-worm;
 Being the Light of Glory,
 Teaching us to live
 On Earth in Heaven.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Margoliouth, *op.cit.*, vol. 2, p.274.

When Traherne refers, above, to ‘The SUN’, he means Christ. As the expressive Word of the Father, Christ is viewed by the poet as surpassing the likewise necessary light of the cosmological ‘Sun’, mentioned further down. By means of the ‘Light’ of Christ, humankind is taught how to live ‘On Earth in Heaven’. Here is an Earth-honouring reversal of the traditional duality of a torrid life on Earth followed by the bliss of Heaven. The expansive expressions within Traherne’s diction have already drawn us toward a unified use of language, or rather, a universalized approach to language. For example, he elides or conflates his terms (SUN and Sun; Light and light) to bring out his non-dual intention.

A little later in ‘Thanksgivings for the Blessedness of his LAWS’ it becomes clearer that within Traherne’s intuition the Word of God and the words of the poet are combined. Together, God’s Word and his own words are his teachers.

They teach me to live
In the Similitude of God,
And are the inward Health
And Beauty of my Soul,
Marrow, Wine, and Oyl,
WITHIN!
They teach me to live in the Similitude of thy Glory.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.275.

The reference to ‘marrow’ is taken from Ps. 63; the references to ‘wine and oil’ are drawn from Ps. 104. But unlike these Psalms, Traherne specifically locates these three substances within himself. Further on, he implies that the marrow, wine and oil are part of ‘THINE INWARD GOODNESS’. The poet’s capitalization prevents us from evading his emphasis.

There are nine pieces of writing which Traherne called ‘Thanksgivings’. Bellette¹⁴⁹ considers that they were written by way of imitation of God’s creativeness. There is no consistent framework and no predictable sequence. Bellette adds that the poet ‘... conveys almost like a musical score the unity within division which is God’s presentation of himself’.¹⁵⁰ I have alluded above to the fact that Traherne implicitly aligns his work with the so-called Plain Style movement. Bellette describes Plain Style as a rejection ‘... of all that is contrived and fanciful in style’.¹⁵¹ He continues: ‘The shift from the authority of words to the authority of experience implies not just a rejection of the formulations of the past but also a willingness to rethink the very nature of the world’.¹⁵² Traherne seems to assume that truth is conveyed to us ‘plain’. The truth, to him, is ‘plain’ in the sense of being self-evident to those who wish to receive it. He also assumes that when the appropriate language is found, the truth can be democratically accessible to all people. These assumptions of Traherne would not necessarily have been shared by other members of the established church. If Traherne held that the divine was so

¹⁴⁹ Bellette, A.F., 1983, *op.cit.*

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.172.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.173.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, p.174.

immanent that no particular or special authority was needed to mediate the divine, then it would situate Traherne as something of a dissident within the establishment.

I have mentioned the book *Religio Medici*, by Browne. It propounds ‘the two books’: that of scripture and that of nature. Yet despite his assumed knowledge of Browne’s book (together with Browne’s well-admired life of ‘lived spirituality’) we have seen that Traherne tends to favour a single act of divine revelation; a unitary Word/word which creates and discloses or discloses as it creates. The divine and the human are co-opted, so to speak, to make manifest the one ‘Lov’. This ‘Lov’ is at work. It is all-ways working. Its work includes the on-going creation of Creation.

Towards the end of ‘Thanksgivings for the Blessedness of his LAWS’ Traherne refers specifically to the ‘one Work’ which includes ‘all things’. These ‘all things’ issue from the Word; they are brought to light (or to sight or to mind) by the human words which work in conjunction with the Word. The poet has asserted that an infant carries the knowledge of both the divine and the earthly, as if by inherent gift or intrinsic grace. But exposure to the world of adults, with their sense of separation and orientation toward individual possessiveness, can blight this Edenic state. In one of his few references to humanity’s negative propensities, Traherne concludes ‘Thanksgivings for the Blessedness of his LAWS’ by telling us that ‘If my delight had not been in thy Law, I had perished in my Trouble’.¹⁵³ We are not told the nature of the trouble. It is clear that we are not meant to dally, overmuch, with private suffering. Rather, we are to consider that the Spirit is with us, to transport us around the cosmos.

¹⁵³ *op.cit.*, p.283.

Quotations throughout this chapter have been chosen for their non-dual purport. Along the way, the relative absence of ‘precise’ imagery in Traherne, coupled with the use of abstract concepts, has given a clue as to the neglect of Traherne’s poetry. But I mentioned earlier that his use of abstraction is an imaginative strategy. Unlike Donne, for example, with his complex allusiveness, Traherne intends to be direct and clear. Stewart ¹⁵⁴ in my view is correct when he states: ‘Traherne’s is an artistry of abstraction: abstract nouns in great numbers, apocopated conjunctions, intransitive verbs. In language Traherne attempts something like the aim of the ‘action’ painters of the 1950’s. He bases his entire strategy on the idea that one cannot think of the whole as apart from its smallest segment’. An empathetic reader will soon see the reason for Traherne’s unlikely mode of achieving his strategy. Stewart does not specifically say so, but in my view Traherne desires that I should focus on the theme of divine inseparability from the world. Further, that I should focus on divine inseparability from particular beings within the world, namely, you and I.

Nonetheless, it is true that Traherne does not, in every poem, match his vision with a poetic embodiment. A stray critic might sometimes consider that his repetitions, his use of capitalization and punctuation (or lack of it) draw attention to the drama of his words in an eccentric manner. Such lines as ‘I felt a Vigour in my Sence / That was all SPIRIT’ (from verse three of *Wonder*, quoted earlier) might be vulnerable to such a charge. But these lines succeed, for me, when set within the overall impression of the complete poem. Even by means of images that have minimum sensuous appeal, Traherne convinces me that he truly believes that

¹⁵⁴ *op.cit.*, p.138.

he affectively experiences the Spirit. Anyone who feels with empathy the poet's emotional intensity might share Traherne's passion. One such is Bellette: 'That curious mixture in Traherne of abstraction and celebration represents a process in which self discovers itself, then moves outward to identify with all that is other, then returns to reclaim the initial experience of infant joy'.¹⁵⁵ Here is a *perichoretic*-like participation in Traherne's hope of conveying the essential unity of the cosmos (and without commitment to any form of essentialism).

Traherne writes about the integral goodness of all things. If his readers should believe otherwise, and hold a dimmer view of humanity, Traherne would advocate a wise unknowing. He would bring the duality of divine and human together. In so doing, he would redefine the boundaries between 'self' and 'other'. I have quoted lines that are low in metaphor, high in abstraction and replete with the kind of imprecise imagery that has since become unpopular. But Traherne embeds himself in his theology. It is from that base that he projects a daring and enthusiastic blend of spirit/matter onto the reader's imagination. He scarcely acknowledges spirit as *ultimately* separate from matter, although his doctrine of creation would imply it. His passion for humanity as a single sacred community (and inseparable from the rest of the created order) is palpable.

As with Eckhart and Julian, Traherne understands humanity to be distinct from the Ground of Love, yet not separate from it. But he wishes to take the reader beyond any description of unity. He wishes to convey all of us, in reciprocity with the divine, to what he calls 'Joy eternal'. Despite the proliferation of concepts, Traherne is keen to represent himself as

¹⁵⁵ Bellette, A.F., 1983, *op.cit.*, p.130.

experience-centred. His words still retain energy, vivacity. His spirited language still asks questions.

Chapter Two: Meister Eckhart

One Spacious Day

Here walks the heretic, al-Hallaj,
who sees God in everyone
and everyone in God.
He can't keep quiet.

Before his crucifixion,
these final words:
*One spacious day, quite soon,
when inner things unite,
the spirit will predominate.
We'll feed less on food,
more on light.*

Here walks al-Hallaj,
who claims the freedom to be himself.
They lead him out of the city,
toward the sound of harsh carpentry.

Meister Eckhart was aware of the fate of those who spoke in clear, non-dual terms. He was aware of the life and witness of al-Hallaj, the subject of my poem above. This Sufi mystic (Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj) was crucified near Baghdad in 922 C.E. He was arrested in Basra after repeatedly announcing the words *ana 'l-haqq* (literally: 'I am the truth'). Such an abolition of distinctions connects with Eckhart's position.

There are passages in Eckhart where his non-dual tendency becomes explicit. For example, ‘There is nothing but one, and where one is, there is all, and where all is, there is one.’¹⁵⁶ It would seem that Eckhart dislikes the rigidity of either/or, preferring that we develop an insight, and then a wisdom, which goes deeper than conventional understandings. Perhaps a sub-text is as follows: if we cling to one side of a duality (if, for example, we favour ‘mind over matter’) we are less likely to emerge into wholeness. The following sermon extract is startling, if convoluted, in its expression of non-duality.

In the love that one gives there is no duality, but one and unity,
and in love ‘I am God’ more than I am in myself.

The prophet says: ‘I have said you are gods and children
of the Most High (Psalm 82:6). That sounds strange that
‘a person can become God in love’, but so it is true
in the eternal truth.’¹⁵⁷

Eckhart’s non-dual Christian discourse is distinct from the dualism of the ‘East’, where non-duality is a central term with standard definitions. Neither Traherne, Eckhart nor Julian unambiguously discuss the moderate non-dualism which they share. Its origin, for them, lies in the non-dual statements attributed in the Gospels to Jesus. Its effect is to partially collapse the classic Western dualisms of creator/creature, subject/object and spirit/matter.

The ambiguity in Eckhart stems from his view that God’s absolute unity and simplicity means that God escapes all conceptualization. God is ‘undifferentiated unity’ whereas human thought

¹⁵⁶ From Sermon 70 in Walshe, M. O’C., trans. & ed., *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, Element Books, London, 1979, vol.1, p.174.

¹⁵⁷ From Sermon 13, *ibid.*, p.110.

and speech cannot avoid the postulation of a subject and a predicate. Duality and multiplicity are always present; whatever statement we make involves a duality between the subject and whatever is postulated concerning the subject. But Eckhart also holds that we are ‘one with God’, both now and in terms of future destiny. He seems to mean a real form of identity with the divine. The innate desire of each soul is to return to the One from which it originally came. It therefore appears that, in the first place, God is One and not ‘three’ ontologically. In the second place, God manifests in a triune manner, and union of humanity with God is possible. If I desire to realize that union, an old ‘I’ must be left behind. The injunction within Eckhart’s sermons can be summarized as follows: ‘*Gang uz dir selbst uz!*’ (‘Go out of yourself!’). But Eckhart undercuts desire and spiritual ambition. He surrounds his ‘Go out of yourself!’ with ‘*sunder war umbe*’ (‘without a why’), to which I will shortly return.

Letting-be

A guiding theme of Eckhart is *Gelâzenheit*, sometimes translated as ‘letting-be’ or as ‘detachment’. Reiner Schürmann¹⁵⁸ considers the most appropriate translation of *Gelâzenheit* to be ‘releasement’. Releasement functions in Eckhart as part of the preparation for the birth of God in the soul, which is Eckhart’s main theme. Eckhart’s passion is that we should ‘make actual’ the implicit ‘seed of God’ within us; that is to say, we should allow the divine birth in our souls. This might or might not yield unusual experiences; Eckhart is less concerned with the nature of an actual experience of union than he is with the underlying principle of unity. He

¹⁵⁸ Schürmann (1941-1993) in *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy*, Lindisfarne Books, Great Barrington, MA, 2001, p.xviii.

mentions Paul's ecstatic experience¹⁵⁹, but does not deal with anything resembling a phenomenology of ecstasy. He is prepared to take theological risks: he has an elevated understanding of humanity; he has a non-dual tendency.

To prepare the way for non-dual spiritual experience, Eckhart explores the meaning of *Gelâzenheit*. This exploration forms a key part of the biblical exegesis and exposition which is central to his philosophy. Beyond abstraction and beyond image, he desires to present the ultimate mystery: the divine Subject, the Infinite. Then his claim is that the soul is destined for mystical union with the divine, not only in the hereafter, but within this life. This concern would remain abstract, if not abstruse, without the emphasis on the divine Subject being peculiarly accessible within a life of releasement.¹⁶⁰

When I preach, I am accustomed to speak about detachment,
and that a man should be free of himself and of all things;
second, that a man should be formed again into that simple good
which is God; third, that he should reflect on the great nobility
with which God has endowed his soul, so that in this way
he may come to wonder at God; fourth, about the purity of the divine
nature, for the brightness of the divine nature is beyond words.
God is a word, a word unspoken.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ As related by the apostle in 2 Cor. 12: 1-7.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Jesus, in the desert following his baptism: he is represented as relinquishing; as finding release from the extraneous; as entering the 'emptiness' or perhaps 'the Eckhartian nothingness', of which more later.

¹⁶¹ From Sermon 53 in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, trans. & ed. Colledge, E., & McGinn, B., Paulist Press, New York, 1981, p. 203)

God and the experience of God are ‘past telling of tongue’ (G. M. Hopkins). But this does not inhibit Eckhart from ‘telling’ at considerable length. His insistence on *Gelâzenheit* is clearly stated in the extract above; the outlook is drastic. The short treatise *On Detachment* implies that detachment or releasement is a deeper quality than even love itself. The noun *Gelâzenheit* is from the verb *lassen*, which means ‘to leave aside’. Eckhart’s use of the noun is thought to be original. I have alluded to a parallel between Eckhart and Asian thought: detachment (or perhaps better for the Asian context: ‘non-attachment’) is mutually a key concept. Hee-Sung Keel describes Eckhart’s view of *Gelâzenheit* in terms of a radical breakthrough.¹⁶² He explains:

The self-denial he has in mind does not simply mean the denial
of a particular desire or action but the denial of desire itself,
or the will itself, including the will to do God’s will.
It means freedom from will as such, the self-will.
Detachment, then, means for Eckhart abandoning self-will
and possessiveness in thought and action.¹⁶³

In a famously unusual interpretation of the words that Jesus reportedly says to Martha (‘There is need of only one thing’ Lk. 10:42, NRSV) Eckhart states that ‘... whoever wants to be free of care and to be pure must have one thing, and that is detachment’.¹⁶⁴ To Eckhart, God himself is detached. From the tradition of divine timelessness, he deduces that God is unmoved by transitory events.

¹⁶² Eckhart’s MHG term is *durchbruch* (or, in the Latin sermons *reditus*) for ‘breakthrough’ and/or ‘return’.

¹⁶³ *Meister Eckhart: an Asian Perspective*, Keel, H-S., Leuven, Belgium, Peeters Press, 2007, p.176.

¹⁶⁴ Colledge & McGinn, *op.cit.*, p.285.

This immovable detachment brings a man into the greatest equality with God, because God has it from his immovable detachment that he is God, and it from his detachment that he has his purity and his simplicity and his unchangeability.¹⁶⁵

Eckhartian *Gelâzenheit* is mainly detachment from images and objects, not a retreat from creating and fostering communion and community.¹⁶⁶ The person who chooses to participate with the divine God will not be found trying to escape from the world's conflicts and sufferings, but will, by identifying mystically with the Son (who suffers at the hands of the world) be reunited mystically with the Father (with whom always the Son identifies). An on-going 'inner work' is required. This will involve action and contemplation, as inseparable. The person who is an 'active contemplative' will have, as his or her inner foundation, *Gelâzenheit*. Keel states that this 'inner work':

... has nothing to do with indulging in any peculiar religious experience, ecstatic or enstatic. Its sole purpose is to enhance detachment from all things, including religious exercises and experiences themselves, only to be engaged in active life rooted in the ground of one's being.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.288.

¹⁶⁶ In connection with the Martha/Mary story of Lk 10, Beverly Lanzetta opines that Eckhart's stated preference for the active life '... may be seen to be a Western mystical version of the "*samsāra* is *nirvāna*" of the Buddhist world.' (*Samsāra* here connotes conditioned reality; *nirvāna* connotes Boundless Openness.) Quotation from: Lanzetta, B.J., 'Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart', *The Journal of Religion* 72:2 (April 1992), Chicago, ILL, The University of Chicago Press, p. 268. In chapter four of the present study I make use of Lanzetta's article *vis-à-vis* Eckhartian nothingness.

¹⁶⁷ *op.cit.*, p.290.

Eckhartian non-dualism relates to both *Gelâzenheit* and to a concept of ‘nothingness’. The soul is required to become ‘nothing’ (MHG: *niht*, or in the L sermons *nihil*) if union with God is to be realized. This is because: ‘... the divine being is equal to nothing, and in it there is neither image nor form.’¹⁶⁸ Elsewhere, Eckhart states that ‘... to be empty of all created things is to be full of God, and to be full of created things is to be empty of God.’¹⁶⁹ Such detachment frees the soul to be able to ‘break through’ to its Ground, and thereafter to ‘break through’ to the Ground of the Godhead.

Eckhart puts forward something of a distinction between God and the Godhead. Those who interpret Eckhart as making a clear distinction would tend to describe it as follows. God is the principle of ‘Being’. God is distinct from the Godhead, which is ‘the Absolute’ in the unqualified dimension of ‘Beyond-Being’. But it needs reiterating that the Godhead, or in other words, the unqualified Absolute, is expressed in the traditional tripartite way. Father, Son and Spirit are figured as *kenotic* expressions of the Infinite which is also One. If Eckhart equates the Godhead with ‘absolute nothingness’, he is not alluding to a vacuum. He is finding language with which to approach reality; he wants to talk about the field, or the matrix, from which everything emerges or flows.

German Sermon 52 includes the well-known injunction to pray to God that we might be free of ‘God’.¹⁷⁰ Assuming that his audience grasps the context of *Gelâzenheit*, Eckhart reiterates the apparently disturbing notion.

¹⁶⁸ from German Sermon 6, in Colledge & McGinn, *op.cit.*, p.187.

¹⁶⁹ from the treatise *On Detachment*, in Colledge & McGinn, p.288.

When man clings to place, he clings to distinction.
Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of 'God',
for my real being is above God if we take 'God' to be the
beginning of created things. For in the same being of God
where God is above being and above distinction,
there I myself was, there I willed myself and committed myself
to create this man. Therefore I am the cause of myself
in the order of my being, which is eternal, and not in the order
of my becoming, which is temporal. And therefore I am unborn,
and in the manner in which I am unborn I can never die.
In my unborn manner I have been eternally,
and am now, and shall eternally remain.¹⁷¹

The stated desire to be free of 'God' appears to be a way of underlining Eckhart's view of an apparent distinction between God and the Godhead. This move on Eckhart's part seems to avoid equating God with Presence. God is that which enables Presence, which in turn enables Love; God is *agape*, but redemption is also configured as *agape*. As with Traherne and Julian, the language of Eckhart at this point is personal and relational. By way of counterpoint, the language of Ramana Maharshi is both personal and impersonal; this will be discussed in chapter four.

¹⁷⁰ in Colledge & McGinn, p.200.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.202f.

A stripping of self-images

The letting go of images and objects does not represent a withdrawal in order to cultivate a particular experience. It is a sign, rather, of an equanimity that remains open and receptive, irrespective of one's experience. Regardless of the external situation, there can be a 'breaking through' (*durchbrechen*) to serene acceptance of whatever, at any given moment, is the case. But the context of such openness, within Eckhart's view, is the givenness of our incorporation into the kingdom of God. In commenting that the church is always deconstructible (but that the kingdom of God is not) John Caputo writes of surrender to the unbounded immediacy of the kingdom.

This letting-be (*Gelâzenheit*) ... is essentially a letting go of human self-sufficiency ... which would deny the very meaning of the time of the kingdom as the time of God's rule, not ours. In the kingdom, time can be experienced authentically only by taking time as God's gift and trusting ourselves to time's granting, which is God's giving. ... By letting go of our own self-possession, by opening ourselves to God's rule, we release the day from its chains. ...

The temporality of the kingdom ... is free, open, unbound, unchained, a day or time that is savoured one day at a time, experienced, lived for itself, in its own upsurge, instant by instant, day by day.¹⁷²

Caputo understands Eckhart's God to be involved in human affairs, although this God is unknowable in essential ways and cannot be described. Eckhart is viewed by Caputo (and

¹⁷² Caputo, J.D., *The Weakness of God: a Theology of the Event*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2006, p.172.

myself) as pastorally concerned for community cohesion and for the shared practices of Christian life. Reading him, we might have the impression of a warm-hearted ascetic not over-concerned with personal belief as such. He might have preached against today's spiritual narcissism, whereby we are encouraged to feel elevated thoughts within the parameters of a self-preoccupation unchallenged by social and environmental responsibility.¹⁷³

Eckhart advocates that all activities be attended by *Gelâzenheit*. I am exhorted, not to look for divine remunerations, but to face up to the illusory quality of my separate, small-s self. The letting-be of releasement will be painful to the extent that I have attached myself to unreality; in particular, to the unreality represented by my isolated and isolating ego. Using older forms of words, Eckhart, Julian and Traherne are agreed in their broad attempt to partially collapse the dualisms of creator/created, subject/object and spirit/matter. It cannot be assumed that they share precisely the same type of non-dualism; neither of them is concerned with definitions here. In the poem below, I try to express a moderate non-dualism which is indebted, in part, to an excerpt from the anonymous fourth century spiritual writer Pseudo-Macarius.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Ruth Burrows writes: 'Only too easily we substitute the 'spiritual life' or the 'contemplative life' for God. Without realizing it we are intent on a self-culture.' Quotation from: Burrows, R., *To Believe in Jesus*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1978, p.94. Elsewhere, Burrows writes: 'By faith we *die*. It means renouncing myself as my own base, my own centre, my own end. It means ... death to the ego.' Quotation from her *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1976, p.59.

¹⁷⁴ 'For the soul that is privileged to be in communion with the Spirit becomes all light, all face, all eye, and there is no part of her that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light. As fire, the very light of fire, is alike all over, having in it no first or last, or greater or less, so also the soul that is perfectly irradiated by the unspeakable beauty of the light of Christ, becomes all eye, all light, all face, all glory, all spirit, being made so by Christ, who drives and guides and carries and bears her, and graces her thus with spiritual beauty.' Quotation from: "Homily I" (of Pseudo-Macarius) in *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Egan, H., ed.) The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1996, pp. 83f.

One Light, Many Lamps

Caught short
by nightfall
in a forest;
chancing upon fungi,
luminescent.

Intense bluish-
white shards
would in the morning
be as cold as
crockery.

Peaked strata,
suspended
like tiered
cave-homes
in Cappadocia,
where in silence
a countenance
was seen
and known,
and known to be
seeing back.

Just so,
the wilderness
sees those
who see it
on a late summer
night with stars,

a night to be brought
to sense
by sight
of the earthly.
This fungus:
a hardening
of light.
Beyond its bluish
glow, tiny beings
call their
complement.
Each of them,
a lamp;
each lamp
the embodiment
of one light.

Separation from ‘the One light’ is what Eckhart and Traherne seem to understand by ‘the Fall’. Neither writer is concerned with elaborating a dualism of good/evil. They view human identity as a unity; it is beyond the zone of opposites. It is participatory, as expressed in 2 Pet. 1:4. The follower of Christ, according to that verse, has ‘... come to share in the very being of God’ (REB). There is an identity to humankind which is more immediate, or more subtle, than the process of thought and of thinking itself.

Beyond metaphysics, creeds and institutions, Eckhart (likewise Julian and Traherne) implies understanding and compassion will be harmonized in direct personal experience. We are drawn

by Love to a kind of crisis point. Once there, we might glimpse the difficult truth that our separate ego is merely an illusion.

Go entirely out of yourself for God's sake, and God will go entirely out of himself for your sake. When these both depart, what remains is a simple *One*. In this One the Father gives birth to his Son in the innermost source.¹⁷⁵

Obviously, Eckhart does not use the word 'ego' but *mit Eigenschaft* ('with attachment to self') which holds clear connotations of individual possessiveness. This attachment prevents the experience of Love and of Reality, through which the illusory aspect of separate existence is transcended. To countermand *Eigenschaft*, Eckhart puts forward the interior activity of 'cutting loose', *abegescheidenheit*, which literally conveys the idea of decess, as in dying. An interior activity characterizes *Gelâzenheit*; there are implications of a peaceful, trusting surrender that seemingly requires nothing from God and asks for nothing. Although Eckhart told his congregations that a prayer of petition could have a legitimate side, he himself seems uncomfortable with the idea of petitioning the divine.¹⁷⁶ Rather, he teaches an emptying out of personal desire. This is a reflection of his central idea, namely, that God can fully enter the human subject, so that the subject can be said to disappear and merge with the divine object. In other words, 'the birth of God in the soul', to which I will need to return.

¹⁷⁵ cited in Walshe, *op.cit.*, p.118.

¹⁷⁶ Reading Eckhart, Julian and Traherne closely, I have the impression that neither writer is particularly interested in petitionary prayer, with the clear exception of Julian's requests to God that she might enter into something of the suffering love of Christ. I feel that each of these three writers accepts that prayer functions, not to change the divine will, but to release divine qualities and purposes into human consciousness. But my feeling could be a projection on my part.

What is the *means* by which the human subject may disappear and merge with God? Part of the means is has to do with the metaphors ‘spark’ (MHG: *Vũinkelîn*) and ‘small castle’ (MHG: *Bürgelîn*) both of which convey in Eckhart the soul’s highest/deepest part. Each soul possesses such a ‘spark’ (or ‘castle’); which is God-given and remains connected to God. Being the soul’s highest/deepest part, the *Vũinkelîn* has the capacity to disentangle the soul from the absorption in created things which obscures the understanding and experience of God. Through grace and through many choices to loosen our attachments, we can (through the *Vũinkelîn*) expand ‘into the divine’. Here Eckhart is drawing together a classic Western dualism. Here, in Eckhart’s theo-philosophy, is the equivalent of the *Vedāntin* teaching of *Tat tvam asi*.

Union with God, however, does not imply that we are transformed into God. But the question arises: does our ‘expansion into divinity’ occur at the expense of individual personality? There is no ready agreement on this question; interpreters of Christian ‘mystics’ will continue to differ on the question of the demise of personality. Eckhart repeatedly says that we are ‘nothing’ in and of ourselves (MHG: *niht*, or *nihil* in the L sermons). By this he underlines our status as contingent creatures. At the same time, we are unique expressions or projections of God. Humanity, according to Eckhart, is uniquely created for union with God. On this non-dual basis, therefore, he insists firstly on our nothingness, and secondly on our status as daughters and sons of the divine.

Divine birth

The idea of a separate, autonomous personhood arises in us as a thought, as a feeling and as a sensation. Our cultural background conspires to confirm that we have accurately gauged ‘the truth’ of the matter, namely, that we are separate individuals. Eckhart’s understanding of Oneness would query this. In modern non-dual language, the thought, the feeling and the sensation of possessing a separate personhood would be regarded as *objects in awareness*. The person would be viewed as ‘That’ to whom these objects appear. This leads to a possible claim, by modern non-dualists, that we are Awareness itself, in some absolute sense.¹⁷⁷ While the subjects of this study do not use such language, Ramana tends to, although his tradition is likewise pre-modern. But if the Christian use of ‘Oneness’ is treated as ‘Awareness’, then Oneness in Eckhart *et al* might be viewed as ‘That’ in which the thought, feeling and sensation of separateness appears. The Oneness/Awareness is not an object, but is the background ‘on which’ objects appear. In terms of writing at the Absolute truth-level, this Oneness/Awareness is our true nature. We appear within That, within the One. A traditional Christian ontologist might want to add that the One is the *I Am*, whose nature is the creative love of *agape*. A Christian inclined to non-dualism might want to affirm: ‘The divine *I Am* is my being (absolute level of truth) but I am not the being of the *I Am* (conventional level of truth)’.

In view of the above, and at the risk of facileness, the word ‘non-separation’ can serve to summarize the outlook of Traherne, Julian, Eckhart and Ramana. Nothing exists

¹⁷⁷ Elsewhere in the present study, I have used the words ‘limitless Awareness’ to characterize the *Ātmā* (or the Self, capital ‘S’).

independently; that which might appear solid, or personal, is really transparent and impersonal (from the perspective of the Absolute truth-level). It is the emphasis on unitive reality or unitive consciousness which brings Ramana into proximity with the three Christians. In the *Advaitic* teaching of Ramana, the phenomenal or empirical self is lured by ‘the Self’ (capital ‘S’) beyond all false self-identification. Paradoxically, the aspirant discovers that she or he was *always* a participant in pure, infinite consciousness. Eckhartian language converges here, inasmuch as the Meister believes that the individualistic self, with its idea of separateness, *falls away*. This happens in the process of learning to participate in the divine. The ‘separated self’ or ego¹⁷⁸ is ultimately illusory (albeit *natural*, inasmuch as it produces the day-to-day functioning sense of ‘I-ness’). This egoic ‘I’ is lured beyond itself, as it were. It is to be distinguished (within conditioned, phenomenal language) from ‘the Self’ (capital ‘S’). The latter is the unconditioned substratum of the universe, the One which ‘awaits’ to be ‘uncovered’ as the undercurrent and effulgence of our true nature.

Within the Upanishads, the Self (capital ‘S’) might serve as a synonym for ‘God’. Ramana tended to use the word ‘God’ as interchangeable with ‘Absolute Being’ and ‘Self’. But his understanding of ‘God’ is *Advaitic*: that is to say, it is not so much personal as ‘all-inclusive’. It is best characterized, perhaps, as limitless Awareness. Traherne capitalizes the word ‘Self’ at times, but might do so as part of his 17th century style. Eckhart uses the phrases ‘our true nature’ or ‘our higher self’, both of which might suggest that analogies be drawn with the Self of the Upanishads. Although Eckhart and Julian teach that humankind needs to revert to

¹⁷⁸ There is no precise equation between the lesser or false self (of long-established conventional, conditioned or empirical speech) and the ego of modernist characterization. The contexts for the respective usages would seem to be incompatible, inasmuch as Freud put forward a (then) unconventional, idiosyncratic and perhaps unnatural use of ‘ego’. Nonetheless, ‘ego’ can serve, on the understanding that through the practice of mindfulness and self-compassion this ‘ego’ can become an object of awareness.

participation in the divine, they also believe that God is infinitely greater than anything that can be thought about God. If someone presumes to think that they have reached a conception of a divine property, it is likely to be more false than true. Contrariwise, Julian's maternal imagery is so graphic and unqualified as to leave room for literality. In the 'poem' below, I allude obliquely to the impossibility of 'speaking the divine'.

Without Images

the sight of the invisible
will be no blazing illumination
but inner sight I mean to say insight
which means seeing without images

the sight of the invisible
will be possible only to eyes large enough
or rather enlarged enough to see the sacred
everywhere

On this view, the *kenotic* or non-egoic 'self' has little use for images or projections. It 'sees the invisible without seeing it'. Such a 'self' might perhaps be viewed as a Christian equivalent of the Upanishadic 'non-substantial self' (Skt: *anātman*; Pali: *anatta*). An epithet by Dōgen expresses a parallel teaching within a Zenist context: 'To learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's self; to learn one's self is to forget one's self.'

It is now appropriate to elaborate Eckhart's idea of the divine fully entering the human subject, even as the subject merges with the divine object, God. When Eckhart uses the word 'God' he means his transcendental predicate 'the One' (*ein* in MHG, or *unum* in the L sermons). This is both a static One (which, dwelling in mystery, is beyond enumeration) and a dynamic process (likewise partaking of mystery). In the mode of 'Father', God eternally gives birth to his 'Son'. By extension, as 'one birth', God also eternally gives birth to the 'Son' in us. A process of detachment and purification is necessary for us to 'avail ourselves' of this birth of the 'Son' in us.

Where is he who is born? Now I say as I have often said before,
that this eternal birth occurs in the soul precisely as it does in eternity,
no more and no less, for it is one birth, and this birth occurs in the
essence and ground of the soul. ... God is in all things as being,
as activity, as power. But he is fecund in the soul alone, for though
every creature is a vestige of God, the soul is the natural image of God.
This image must be adorned and perfected in this birth.¹⁷⁹

It seems to be central to this passage that the birth of the 'Son' in the soul is an eternal birth. That is, the birth in the soul is not separate from the birth of the 'Son', who is not involved in time's constraints and 'was' and 'is' eternally born. In German Sermon 12, Eckhart specifically states: '... we are this same Son'.¹⁸⁰ He continues:

When God sees that we are the only-begotten Son,
he is very quick to pursue us and acts as though his divine being

¹⁷⁹ Walshe, *op.cit.*, p.61.

¹⁸⁰ In *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. McGinn, B., Paulist Press, New York, 1986, p.267.

were going to burst and completely vanish,
so that he might reveal to us the utter abyss of his divinity
and the fullness of his being and nature.
God hastens to make it all ours just as it is his.
Here in this fullness God has delight and joy.
Such a person stands in God's knowing and in God's love
and becomes nothing other than what God is in himself.¹⁸¹

This sermon is a fine example of Eckhart's non-dual tone. The birth of the 'Son' in each human soul will manifest itself as transformed behaviour. People will no longer attempt to maximize every circumstance of their lives. Instead, they will realize ('in our Ground') who they really *are*. They will be 'perfect souls', having been brought into divine-human unity, or deification. Eckhart believes that detachment should take place within 'regular life'. He is opposed to seclusion, excessive asceticism and to world-denial.

Here is part of a Christmas sermon:

Here, in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature. St Augustine says: What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters.¹⁸²

The process of the birthing of God in the soul could be described as 'mystical'. By this I mean that a person is given, or enters into, an experience of transcendence of normal sensory

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.268.

¹⁸² Walshe, *op.cit.*, p.15.

responses. Such an experience might occur through a person identifying herself with something more than 'finitude', if that is possible. Certainly, to Eckhart, the birthing of God in the soul means a radical shifting of the centre of gravity, so to speak. The shift is away from the little or delusory self to the greater or true self/Self. Dispossessed of the delusory self, the soul is 'repossessed' by the One who gave it birth.

This is the 'Oneing' which Julian later takes up. There is a reconciliation of opposites. Conflictual impulses within the soul are no longer pitted against each other. An impulse to remain attached to one's separate identity is no longer in a dualistic relation to an impulse to dispossess oneself and allow 'repossession' by the divine. The soul has found its unity in and with God; such unity (in the view of my heroes) is both primordial and natural. Centuries after Eckhart, Kant declaims against the ethereal swamp of mysticism and the destructive irrationalities potentially associated with it. It is obvious that one of Eckhart's concerns is 'the mystery of the heart'. Did Kant have Eckhart in mind, at least in part?

Passages in the NT are cited by Eckhart to corroborate his non-dual drift. Not the least of these passages is 'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30, NRSV) and '... the Father is in me and I am in the Father' (Jn 10:38, NRSV). Eckhart is nonetheless clear that, in the awareness of Jesus, God is an 'I' distinct from his own 'I'. The Gospel accounts assert that Jesus refers to what might be called 'the Other who is not wholly other'. It is from this Other that Jesus is said to have come (and will return to). But the relationship, especially in John's Gospel, is profoundly mysterious. Jesus is portrayed as maintaining constant awareness of God as his Father, and simultaneously as seeming to 'locate' the Father as inseparable from his own 'I'.

Chronologically, the Gospel accounts are held to have been written after the Pauline Epistles, which allude to non-dual tendencies within the infant Christian communities. For example, Ro. 8:14 -17 (REB): ‘All who are moved by the Spirit of God are sons of God ... the Spirit of God joins with our spirit in testifying that we are God’s children; and if children, then heirs. We are God’s heirs and Christ’s fellow-heirs’. Other instances could be cited, such as 1 Cor. 6:17 and 13:12b (NRSV): ‘But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.’ ... ‘Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known’.

Although full knowledge is always ‘up ahead’, Eckhart finds concurrence with Julian and Traherne in his confidence that the state of beatitude is not only post-death. The three appear to agree that one of the obstacles to a joyful realization of beatitude is the notion that such a condition is reserved for the future. Their spirituality is oriented around understandings and affective experiences that take place *here*. Therefore ‘Realization’ is involved, to co-opt the sub-continental word which implies an immediate and lived-out embodying of truth. Such ‘Realization’ runs far deeper than our fleeting identification with the various roles which we assume in the world of outward consciousness. I have mentioned that Eckhart underlines human contingency; we are *niht* (or *nihil*) in and of ourselves. Later in this study it will be necessary to assess unselfconscious *kenosis* (self-emptying) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness) as indispensable to ‘Realization’ or ‘non-dual awakening’.

Eckhart’s ‘birth mysticism’ is positive toward the human body. Neither he, nor Julian nor Traherne preach self-denial. Eckhart’s congregations are not required to make a dualistic choice. They do not have to choose between cultivation of the soul at the expense of nurturing

the body. There is no focus on eternity at the expense of responsibility for what happens in the present time. Eckhart is capable of being distinctly practical. He opposes, for example, a popular idea that contemplation is a passive activity, fit for a recluse. The ‘true seeing and true knowing’ of contemplation is intended to nourish, not a ‘gazing at being’, but a ‘participation in being’. Eckhart’s hearers are expected to be verb-oriented, giving birth to the ‘Son’ by actively becoming and begetting. This would have resonated with Traherne. It appears to me that both men eschew ‘prayer’, in the sense of requesting something from God. For if we are ‘full’, we have no need to pray in that sense. Eckhart writes:

What is the prayer of the solitary heart? My answer is that detachment and emptiness cannot pray at all, for whoever prays desires something from God: something to be added ... or something to be taken away. But the heart that is detached has no desire for anything, nor has it anything to be delivered from. So it has no prayers at all; it’s only prayer consists in being one with God.¹⁸³

‘Without a why and wherefore’

According to Charlotte Radler the ethically-oriented teachings of Eckhart can be described as apophatic.¹⁸⁴ Apophatic or negative theology has a variety of meanings, because negation, as a means of working towards a description of the divine, arose in diverse traditions in different

¹⁸³ in *The Best of Meister Eckhart*, ed. Backhouse, H., Crossroad, New York, 1966, p.96.

¹⁸⁴ ‘Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and Its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue’, Radler, C., *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26, University of Hawai’i Press, 2006.

eras.¹⁸⁵ But broadly speaking, and as far as Eckhart is concerned, the apophatic method deliberately includes the possibility of undermining itself. With his persistent attitude of *openness* as far as referential positions are concerned (and aware that he is writing ‘that which cannot be written’) Eckhart effectively blurs the distinctions between subject and object. Apophatic theology tends to ‘take back’ whatever it has asserted, and then (perhaps) take back the taking back. But on the face of it, Eckhart simply desires that his hearers and readers should question their assumptions and preconceptions with regard to the conventional truth-level and the complete duality it posits, as between creature and Creator.

Radler can claim an apophaticism for Eckhart because his writings are almost devoid of specific ethical instruction. She writes:

According to Eckhart’s apophatic ethics, it is out of the inner ground that the detached human being performs works without a why (*sunder war umbe*), not for the sake of something but for the sake of no purpose and nothing, that is, God. The only option for a detached person, who rests content in the emptiness of the divine, is to live and work a way-less and why-less life toward God as the final goal. In living this way the detached human being does not totalize or fracture the integrity of the neighbour, by instrumentalizing him or her, but truly recognizes and acknowledges the communal identity of being.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, Paul Rorem’s essay ‘Negative Theologies and the Cross’ in *Harvard Theological Review* 101:3-4, 2008, pp.451-464. Rorem does not mention the rather obvious point that the apophatic would seem to be best approached as a way of refining the language(s) of kataphatic or positive theology. Vladimir Lossky (1957; 2005) writes of the combination of kataphatic and apophatic theologies, whereby ‘... knowledge is transformed into ignorance, the theology of concepts into contemplation, dogmas into experience of ineffable mysteries.’ (Lossky, V., *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clark and Co., Cambridge, England, 1957; 2005, p.238.)

¹⁸⁶ Radler, C., *op cit.*, p.114.

Some practical implications of a life lived ‘without a why’ are mentioned by Dorothee Soelle. She believes that Christian mysticism can help to contain the ego and reduce world-wide violence. Soelle writes as follows:

This ‘without a why or a wherefore’ that we should live in, that life itself lives in, what does it mean? It is the absence of all purpose, all calculation, every *quid pro quo*, every tit for tat, all domination that makes life itself its servant. Wherever we are torn between being and doing, feeling and acting, we no longer live *sunder war umbe*.¹⁸⁷

The seemingly all-pervasive alternative is bleak:

Instead, we measure expenditure and success, calculate probability and benefit, or else obey fears we do not understand. I say this with a view to the goal-centred rationality that pervades our highly technologized world. Such a rationality prohibits any form of existence for which there is no purpose: we eat certain foods in order to lose weight, we take dancing lessons in order to keep fit, and we pray in order to facilitate specific wish fulfillment by God.¹⁸⁸

When language is conducted ‘without a why and wherefore’ it obviously carries less intentionality, less purposiveness. It carries, instead, more of a tone of celebration: of acknowledgment for the sake of acknowledgment. Language, in other words, can bear the character of praise. It can speak of the letting go of my preoccupation or distraction. There can be a letting go of what Eckhart calls ‘what is one’s own’ (*Eigenschaft*). Soelle continues:

¹⁸⁷ *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Soelle, D., Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2001, p.60.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

While praise may have its reasons – and mingles with thanksgiving in the language of liturgy – in reality it always has the character of the *sunder war umbe*. For example, in praising the moon as it rises, in praising someone who is loved or, indeed, in praising the source of all good, the ego that is possessed by goals and that craves dominance vanishes. It has stepped out of itself. It has scuttled itself.¹⁸⁹

Soelle makes use of Simone Weil's often-quoted and traditional statement to the effect that true attention-giving, in its detachment or 'emptiness', is the substance of prayer. She describes Weil's statement as a clear example of Eckhart's *sunder war umbe*. In my view, Soelle rightly discusses Eckhart as an exemplar for this third millennium. She writes of Eckhart in terms of a critical, Christ-infused, practical mysticism. Whatever we can make of Eckhart's 'Godhead beyond God', the assumed 'beyondness' does not preclude either access or union. We are *re-called* to union with ultimacy, right where we are sitting or standing now, as inferred in my poem below.

The Potter and the Prison

Simply to be here is more than a pleasure,
writes a Japanese potter on a jug he has made
in the Shogun's prison. He is living out
his teacher's words: *If enlightenment*
is not where you're standing,
where will you look?

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.61.

It is not hard to imagine Julian and Traherne agreeing with Eckhart that even an *engaged* mysticism must conceive of the divine as unknowable in an absolute sense.¹⁹⁰ God allows ‘God’ to be experienced in the kind of communion that is manifested in the love between people and in the kind of prayer that manifests an awareness of already-existing union. As the process of union with God begins to take place, Eckhart infers that joy emerges as a natural response. The unity can be ‘known’ by the human subject with the aid of reason and with the assistance of that to which reason points. The word ‘known’ would seem to equate with an awareness of a ‘unity’, both within ourselves and within the ‘exterior’ world. Inherent to this ‘knowledge’ is the awakening of an *I Am* consciousness. The paradox is that this *I Am* is not egocentric. It ‘knows’ itself, only insofar as it knows itself to be part of a (the) universal Self. But of course my three writers express this in classically Christian triune terms. Eckhart appears superficially to advance a Buddhist tenet, when he declares that there is no such thing as a separate *me*. In our more enlightened moments (he states) we all *know* this to be true. The enlightenment to which he refers is instigated and brought to maturity by the Spirit of Christ within. To ‘find’ this inner Christ is to find oneself, since to find oneself is to find the True and the True is ‘God’.

It would seem to me that theories regarding truth (what to rule in; what to rule out) might not concern Eckhart so much as the question of practice (what should we do?). The allied question (what should we be?) likewise concerns Julian and Traherne. Eckhart mentions ‘truth’ frequently; perhaps the impression is purposefully conveyed that truth should always be up for

¹⁹⁰ And yet, according to Eckhart, there is a sense in which the word *indistinction* is valid. Writing from God’s point of view, as it were, Eckhart uses a language of identification or indistinction to figure humanity’s re-turn or reversion to God. Does Eckhart posit an ontological identity between God and humanity? This is the area of Eckhart’s potential aporia.

discussion.¹⁹¹ On the other hand, Eckhart might be best understood when we choose to inhabit his perspective on truth, even if this entails suspension of disbelief. Neither he, Julian nor Traherne overtly deny a separate *me*, but the tonal register is one of non-separation. In his few negative passages, Traherne mentions the ugly side of getting, calculating and spending wealth. But his forays into negativity are to counterpoint non-separation. In the next chapter, I discuss Julian's hopefulness with regard to human transformation. Her belief in God's maternal care takes her beyond a close focus on the crucifixion to an all-inclusive positivity. Eckhart is also positive, but more abstract to the extent that he is more concerned with transcendence through divine birth in the soul.

Entering the life divine

When Eckhart alludes to transcendence, he is not necessarily thinking of the supramundane, or of a situation that might obtain after death, such as heavenly transcendence. Nor is he thinking, primarily, of the indwelling of God in this life. If Eckhart has a theme or 'a single great idea' from which all his other ideas develop, it is God's birth in the soul.¹⁹²

If anyone were to ask me: why do we pray, why do we fast,
why do we all perform our devotions and good works,
why are we baptized, why did God, the All-Highest,
take on our flesh? – then I would reply: in order that God

¹⁹¹ I sense that he abhors the alternative, where *power* has the last word.

¹⁹² Even the crucial *Abegescheidenheit* (the letting-be or detachment discussed earlier in this chapter) can be viewed as developing out of Eckhart's doctrine of divine birth in the soul.

may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God.
That is why the whole of Scripture was written and why God
created the whole world and all the order of angels:
so that God could be born in the soul and the soul in God.¹⁹³

According to Philip Sherrard a significant number of the Greek Fathers accepted that each person possessed ‘an inherent capacity to be divinized.’¹⁹⁴ Eckhart’s equivalent to the Patristic emphasis on divinization is the birth of God in the ‘ground of the soul’. Here he writes of the ramifications of this experience:

I am often asked if a man can reach the point where he is no longer hindered by time, multiplicity, or matter. Assuredly! Once this birth has really occurred, no creatures can hinder you; instead, they will all direct you to God and this birth. ... In fact, what used to be a hindrance now helps you most. Your face is so fully turned towards this birth that, no matter what you see and hear, you can get nothing but this birth from all things. All things become simply God to you, for in all things you notice only God, just as a man who stares long at the sun sees the sun in whatever he afterwards looks at.¹⁹⁵

A distinctive word in Eckhart is *Grunt* or ground, or ground of being. He often uses the phrase ‘ground of the soul’, so that *Grunt* does service as a synonym for the deepest ‘heart’ of each person. This ‘ground’ is beyond name and form. It is both *in* the world, *yet* transcendent. The

¹⁹³ from Sermon 2 in *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, ed. & trans. Davies, O., Penguin, London, 1994, p.112. The same sermon is nominated, elsewhere, as German Sermon 38.

¹⁹⁴ Sherrard, P., *Human Image: World Image*, Golgonooza, Ipswich, England, 1992, p.164.

¹⁹⁵ Walshe, *op.cit.*, p.45.

doctrine regarding incarnation implies full participation in the human ‘ground’ by Christ as the ‘Son’. Cyprian Smith elaborates:

What must I do to get into my own ground? I have to strip away the ‘images’. I have to let go of all that I normally consider as ‘myself’, all the external part of my nature which is conditioned by outward circumstances, all my individual habits of mind, patterns of behaviour, assumptions and expectations. But if I do that, I shall have let go of all that is *distinctively* me, all that separates and distinguishes me from other people. ... At this level all distinctions between human beings fade away; at this level they are all one.¹⁹⁶

Eckhart believes that we not only encounter the ‘Son’ when we enter the ‘ground’, but that in a sense we *become* the ‘Son’. We revert to being the children of God that we were created to be in the first place. Smith continues:

If we strip away from ourselves all that is accidental, relative and individual in ourselves, we shall attain that ‘universal human nature’ which has been united to Christ, and the Incarnation will thus become a present reality for us, here and now, in our lives.¹⁹⁷

A physical incarnation, accepted as an actual historical moment, is less significant to Eckhart than an ‘inward’ incarnation. If the ‘ground of the soul’ simultaneously transcends the world and is within the world (and ‘available’ within the depths of each person) a present-moment

¹⁹⁶ Smith, C., *The Way of Paradox: Spiritual Life as taught by Meister Eckhart*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1987, p.82f.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.84.

transformation of life is possible. This would apply, irrespective of any historical claim. Such a conception was taken up by Feuerbach who, as he moved from Idealism to a form of speculative naturalism, offered a perverse version of Eckhartian thought.¹⁹⁸

Smith assumes a Christian readership when he states that:

Eckhart ... does not encourage us to become 'Christ-centred' in the sense of being exclusively preoccupied with the historical figure He wants us rather to encounter Christ as a living, active force within ourselves, in the present moment.¹⁹⁹

Therefore Smith can conclude: 'Rather than merely 'follow' Christ, or 'believe' in Christ, we *become* Christ.'²⁰⁰ It is not difficult to understand why powerful men of the Church sought to discredit Eckhart. Eventually, part of his work was condemned. Many others, in Germany and beyond, found themselves drawn to a deeper life, and to involvement with household churches and with other communities, as a result of Eckhart's preaching.

As stated earlier, Eckhart's God is One (*ein* or *unum*) but manifests as a triunity which, as with God-as-One, is beyond enumeration; there are not three 'instances' of God. Such mysteries are made possible through that which, in God, can be called 'mind' or 'intellect' or 'act of understanding'. This 'intellect' (MHG: *vernünffticheit*, or, in the L sermons *intellectus*) is

¹⁹⁸ Commenting on Feuerbach's atheism, Denys Turner states: 'You have only to reverse subject and predicate - turn God, the subject for theology, into the 'divine' as predicate of the human - and the alienated truths of theology become truths repossessed in humanism' See Turner's *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, CUP, 2004, p.229.

¹⁹⁹ *op cit.*, p.86.

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*

consistently given priority over 'being'. That which is called 'the One' is the cause of 'being'. Therefore 'the One' should not itself be called 'being'. Eckhart is consistent with medieval usage in distinguishing between 'intellect' and 'reason'. The 'intellect' relates to the capacity to understand and to the act of understanding; the 'reason' refers to that which might devolve from acts of understanding. The Latin *esse* is translated by McGinn as 'being' or 'existence' or as 'act of existence'. Others have rendered the MHG *Isticheit* as 'Is-ness' and sometimes translated *esse* as 'Isness'. In itself, 'being' is derived from 'intellect'. That is to say, wherever Eckhart uses *vernünfticheit* or *intellectus* in his attempt to characterize God's inner life, he takes 'being' to be derived from it.

The following two passages are from Frank Tobin's translation of German Sermon 9.

God works above being in vastness, where he can roam.
He works in nonbeing. Before being was, God worked.
He worked being when there was no being.
Unsophisticated teachers say that God is pure being.
He is as high above being as the highest angel is above a gnat.
I would be speaking as incorrectly in calling God a being
as if I called the sun pale or black.²⁰¹

When we grasp God in being, we grasp him in his antechamber,
for being is the antechamber in which he dwells.
When is he then in his temple, in which he shines as holy?
Intellect is the temple of God. Nowhere does God dwell more properly
than in his temple, in intellect ... remaining in himself alone

²⁰¹ Cited in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. McGinn, B., *op.cit.* p.256.

where nothing ever touches him; for he alone is there in his stillness.
God in the knowledge of himself knows himself in himself.²⁰²

Here, Eckhart juxtaposes divine intellect and human intellect. By the word ‘intellect’ we know that he means the act of understanding, which has priority over ‘being’. There is a sense, in Eckhart, in which intellect is uncreated; in other words, divine. The metaphors ‘spark’ (*Vüinkelîn*) or ‘small castle’ (*Bürgelîn*), which characterize the soul’s latent power, appear connected with that which is ‘uncreated’. It is as if these metaphors represent the soul’s highest or deepest part: that which retains a connection with God.

On the question of the priority of ‘intellect’ or ‘act of understanding’ over ‘being’, Keel elaborates:

Like divine intellect, human intellect is free from the distinctions and particularities characterizing finite beings. In its clean and empty nature, intellect is not a being but rather nothingness (*nihil*), like divine nothingness. It is precisely this empty, nothingness-like nature of intellect that enables it to cognize things universally, not being confined to a particular category of beings.²⁰³

It is difficult to grasp what ‘nothingness’ and ‘divine nothingness’ might mean here. Since Keel also uses the word ‘empty’, does he mean Buddhist emptiness, *śūnyatā*? It is clear that apophatic theology should attempt to avoid assigning words to that which is ineffable; it is also

²⁰² *ibid.*, p.257.

²⁰³ *op. cit.*, p.123f.

clear that we all necessarily have recourse to words. There will always be definitional impotence. I will later consider *śūnyatā* in relation to the self-emptying of *kenosis*.

One reason for Eckhart's popularity today is that his metaphysics is based on *vernünfticheit* or *intellectus* rather than on 'being' as such. Eckhartian rhetoric (if not precisely Eckhartian theology) puts forward a fusing, within the one Ground, of the human 'intellect' with the divine 'intellect'. This perspective on 'intellect' is, *prima facie*, inseparable from an apparent belief that the soul has something 'uncreated' about it. McGinn places this disputed point into a mollifying context:

The 'uncreated something' is *intellect as intellect*, as virtual being,
not as formal being in the world. It is something *in* the soul
(or perhaps better, the soul is really *in* it) ...
... The 'uncreated something' is not and cannot be a part of any-*thing*.
It is as mysterious and as unnameable in us as it is in God.²⁰⁴

Mysterious indeed; nonetheless Eckhart views humanity as part of God's manifestation. In myself I am 'nothing' (*niht* or *nihil*). But to the degree to which I am *aware*, I can become by grace a participant in 'the One'. My phenomenal self will be eased to one side; I will realize my 'share', so to say, within 'the One' (*ein* or *unum*). Perhaps this is a prominent aspect of the influence of Neoplatonism on Eckhart. Humanity returns to 'the One'. Humanity can, through the grace of increased awareness of the true situation, return to its 'share' within the One.

²⁰⁴ McGinn, B., *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, Crossroad, New York, 2001, p.113.

Further, it seems that Eckhart believes that humanity was never *truly* outside ‘the One’, in the first place.

The Eckhartian aporia, in which non-dual statements can be taken to suggest a shared ontology between God and humanity, has raised eyebrows since the early fourteenth century. A tentative ‘solution’ is that Eckhart is best assessed, today, as a theopoet. There appears to be scant support for such a view in Eckhartian scholarship. One exception is Oliver Davies who finds poetic characteristics in the sermons (both MHG and L) and thereby eases the perplexity surrounding the less temperate non-dual statements.²⁰⁵ Assessments by Denys Turner likewise tend to support a theopoetic interpretation of Eckhart. For example, Turner suggests that the increasing use of the vernacular in Eckhart’s day led to ‘... a distinctive theological rhetoric.’²⁰⁶ Noting the possible influence of Marguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des Ames Simples*, Turner hints that because both wrote with pastoral intent in their respective vernaculars, both were given to rhetorical hyperbole.²⁰⁷

Eckhart’s suggestion that the intellect is uncreated is regarded by Turner as a legitimate implication from Neoplatonic doctrine. It was common, in medieval theology, to hold that all beings existed ‘virtually’ in God’s mind, from eternity. What we *are*, in contingent life, is what we *were* in God’s mind. Turner summarizes Eckhart’s use of the tradition as follows:

²⁰⁵ See his *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*, SPCK, London, 1991, p. 180 and *passim*.

²⁰⁶ Quotation from: *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, CUP, Cam., England, 2004, p. 99.

²⁰⁷ See Turner’s *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, CUP, Cam., England, 1995, p.138ff. Eckhart’s use of *abegescheidenheit* and *Gelâzenheit* is preceded by Marguerite’s use of *l’aneantissement*: the annihilation of that which prevents me from becoming who I truly am.

... what I most fully and truly *am*, in my contingent, created existence, is what I *was* in my source. My true being, intellect, is not merely divine but identical with the Godhead in which there can be no possibility of distinctions.²⁰⁸

Julian makes a parallel move. She writes, not of ‘something uncreated’ in humanity, but of the ‘substance’ of the soul being inseparable from the ‘substance’ of God.²⁰⁹ In the next chapter, I will need to assess her management of this puzzle. Julian’s apparent radicalism is mentioned by Turner, but he believes that it ‘carries no risks for Julian’.²¹⁰ On the other hand, Eckhart openly espouses a form of non-dualism.

... Julian can confidently play with formulas little short of Eckhart’s in audacity while remaining firmly within the common Neoplatonic tradition, while Eckhart’s version of them departs from the tradition.²¹¹

To the extent that ‘truth’ is accessible, Eckhart declares it to be accessible through paradox. Both *via positiva* and *via negativa* are necessary; even by Eckhart’s time, the negative theology of apophasis was a highly traditional method for attributing (or rather, denying) qualities to the divine.²¹² Eckhart uses the method, at least in part, to break down what he considers to be the

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p.156.

²⁰⁹ In *Showings*, LT Ch. 54

²¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.160.

²¹¹ *ibid.*, p.162.

²¹² Paul Rorem reminds us: historically there has been a multiplicity of negative theologies. Furthermore: ‘It is a misconstrual of negative theology to regard the apophatic as a free-floating epistemological principle for individuals, isolated from the

How like an Angel came I down!
 How Bright are all Things here!

When first among his Works I did appear
 O how their GLORY me did Crown?

The World resembled his *Eternitie*,
 In which my Soul did Walk;
And evry Thing that I did see,
 Did with me talk.²¹³

²¹³ Ridler, *op.cit.*, p.6.

Neither Traherne, Julian nor Eckhart succumb to any ‘religious’ impulse to denigrate the body or the world. They complain only of an aspect of the human will that inclines humanity towards what is now called narcissism. Hence the need for *kenosis*; it is in acts of self-emptying that *metanoia* (openness to conversion) is expressed. *Metanoia* is understood as a life-long process of moving beyond the mind’s tendency to be content with its current thought-patterns. I continually re-cover my true self/Self. As a result of *metanoia*, there is *koinonia* (fellowship: the manifestation of ‘inter-being’).²¹⁴

To recapitulate the position developed by Eckhart (and perhaps implied by Julian and Traherne): the receptive self meets up with the divine, *all-ways*, but without comprehending it. And in order for the human subject to *re-merge* with the divine object, the notion ‘God’, as a notion, should be abandoned. The soul then remains as free from ‘knowing’ as it was before the person was born. Eckhart, Julian and Traherne hold the traditional view that God is beyond comprehension, but not beyond experience.²¹⁵ On one hand, God cannot be described, except in terms of mystery; on the other hand, all things reveal God. It is a question of seeing; those who pay the closest attention become the pure in heart. What they see is *carried alive*, so to say, into their hearts and into their actions, by means of their *passionate seeing*. Is this not another way of saying that faith is an act of imagination? In secular terms, is it a way of saying that ‘the good life’ consists in imaginative seeing?

²¹⁴ A question which might concern theists is as follows: how can we best (re)-incarnate ‘inter-being’ within an over-individualized culture? If ‘inter-being’ is to be manifested, ‘interlocution’ is required. This carries the risk of the conversation slipping sideways into relativism. A second question might be: how can ‘spiritual humanism’ best be articulated, in a way that is theistic (yet declines to freight theism with every atrocity that has resulted from it)?

²¹⁵ They could well have cited an aphorism from Pseudo-Dionysius: ‘There is no kind of thing which God is, and there is no kind of thing which God is not’.

Does the Eckhartian theo-philosophy of releasement, of ‘uncovering’, bear analogy with Indian and South East Asian philosophies? Did Traherne know Eckhart’s work? Was Eckhart’s near-contemporary, Julian of Norwich, familiar with it? The answer to these questions remains unclear. Each of them employs a language which points to humanity’s participation within the Infinite, conceived as a cosmic transcendence which authors all that is finite, which contains the finite without itself being containable. This accords with their Church adherence and more especially with their shared meditative tradition. At the same time, their God is irrepressibly immanent; as Living Spirit their God generates communion between all of life. This is relevant in today’s trans-religious attempts to put forward a coherent, non-exclusivist and non-oppositional narrative. Such a narrative might serve as an option for reasoned commitment.

The temerity with which Eckhart claims that the divine Subject is accessible within a human object has resonances with the Upanishadic tradition, which prominently includes a speculative philosophy of identity between the divine and human. The emphasis on overcoming distinctions between the perceiving subject (for example, the divine Subject) and the objects of the world (for example, the devotee) is with view to *Brahmanic* union. *Brahman* is perhaps best understood as ‘the Infinite’ (which in some way includes the finite) and not as ‘the Absolute’ (which implies distinction from that which is relative). *Brahmā* (with the macron over the final ‘a’) is best understood as the Absolute appearance of *Brahman* in the cosmos, in order to produce beings. If the world of beings that *Brahmā* produces is regarded as Absolute, then that is illusion. That is to say, the world is only illusory when regarded erroneously as Absolute. Between *Brahmā* and the beings which *Brahmā* generates there is an accepted

dualism. On the other hand, *Brahmanic* union is taken by thorough-going *Advaitins* to mean the complete absence of differentiation.

It is important to observe that the *Ātmā* (or ‘the Self’) of the Upanishads refers to the innermost principle or ultimate ground of humanity. Accordingly, ‘the Self’ is often equated with *Brahman* and with the Absolute. But not always. A degree of flexibility in language allows ‘the Self’ to be construed as both non-dual and dual. An angle of vision which is non-dualist is not the same as a monist account of reality. In India there is widespread *devotion* to manifestations of the Self. Devotion implies a dualistic element, even though the Self (as our innermost principle) is commonly held to be non-dual. It should also be said that within devotional Hinduism, when a devotee identifies with the Self, this is not necessarily a declaration of being identical to the Self. Rather, to ‘identity with the Self’ implies the (re-)discovery of one’s original Self, capital ‘S’. Such a relation has its parallel in Eckhart’s ‘true nature’ and in Christianity as a whole. The devotee of Christ is encouraged to identify with Christ. This connotes, not a belief in *being identical*, but a vision of finding oneself, one’s true self, through relationship. God is not only considered to be ‘out there’, accessible to faith, but is regarded as ‘in here’. I understand this to be the viewpoint of Eckhart, Julian and Traherne.

In the present chapter, I am arguing that Eckhart’s understanding of humanity’s true nature might function in a similar way to that of the Upanishadic ‘Self’. But verbal elision is fraught, and an impulse to find common ground can be intemperate. The Upanishadic ‘Self’ and the Eckhartian ‘our true nature’ share a transcendent viewpoint, but there are varieties of

transcendence, some of them linked with patriarchal assumptions and projections.²¹⁶ The transcendent viewpoint to which I refer can perhaps be thought of as ‘grounded’, while at the same time being paradoxically boundless, inasmuch as it embraces both the relative and the absolute. In Christian understandings, it is the relationality of the divine *perichoresis* that ‘grounds’ the divine transcendence, which has no boundaries. As shown in the previous chapter, the breaking down of boundaries is very important to Traherne. He does not elaborate a theopoem of transcendence as such. But in Eckhart, a paradox is that the breaking of boundaries does not ‘touch’ a pure transcendence.

But the main paradox for Eckhart, as for Julian and Traherne, would appear to be that divine transcendence is realizable. It manifests as immanence: a seemingly inevitable (and to that extent, unremarkable) immanence within (all?) creaturely life. The practice of devotion, or surrender, is the *perichoretic* avenue through which transcendence becomes grounded.²¹⁷ This is broadly the case in the Upanishadic milieu; through grace a human being can Realize some kind of identity with the Infinite.²¹⁸ As to my Christian writers, a progression is put forward, beginning with the dualism of devotion and moving in the direction of ‘devotion without difference’ (Skt. *abheda bhakti*) and union. The unitive mystery is *perichoretic* in origin and

²¹⁶ By the same token, I need to be aware of projecting my own issues onto a demonized patriarchy. Without *śūnyatā* (or the ‘Western’ equivalent of purity of heart) all my putative concerns with ‘spirituality’ (*et al.*) are bound to be distorted by my projections.

²¹⁷ Surrender is not necessarily to be equated with submission, because the former involves a conscious choice, whereas the latter might not.

²¹⁸ In Buddhist terms, surrender is often understood as yielding to *śūnyatā* (emptiness; or what David Loy calls ‘ungroundedness’). Loy understands surrender as disclosing ‘ungroundedness’ as the source of spirituality and as ‘something’ formless which transcends the self. Fairly unusually, in my readings of Buddhist expositors, Loy does not shy away from a notion of transcendence, albeit one that excludes a higher or inherent reality. In the main, Loy’s non-dualism points in a somewhat different direction from the use of non-dualism in the present study. See my Introduction for Loy’s description of three main types of non-dualism. In addition to the book quoted there, see also Loy’s *Lack and Transcendence: The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism, and Buddhism* (Humanity Books, Amherst, NY, 1996).

outworking. It is not remote from other contingent creatures. It is not separatist; nor does it lack communal concern.

The many representations of deities in India can evoke distaste among those see themselves as monotheists. But monotheists (in my experience) often fail to imagine that One God might be represented under myriad forms, without recourse to idolatry. A sense of monotheistic superiority, common to ‘Western’ sensibility, is dispelled when the many representations are accepted as pointers to the one truth, namely, that the Infinite is beyond all possible representation. A full transcendence of the Infinite is acknowledged; a full immanence is also acknowledged. Traditionally, it is heretical within the Abrahamic religions to blur the boundary between Creator and creature. But within mystically-inclined movements, an overarching theme can be imagined, of ‘consciousness’ or of ‘consciousness ever-evolving’. This implies that we are part of the subjectivity of the universe. As subjects, we experience our own subjectivity in a manner that cannot be explained by anything else. No adequate metaphor can be used to describe our own subjectivity, since it is primary and ‘untranslatable’. Perhaps it could be said that we are ‘more than conscious’ or part of consciousness itself. But is there a meaningful sense in which a claim could be made that we *are* consciousness? The subject remains opaque. Perhaps there are internal distinctions within consciousness that are yet to be adequately described. The word ‘consciousness’ might, *pro tempore*, approximate ‘heightened awareness’ which is tilted toward ‘immediacy’. This is intimated in the following lines from Traherne’s *Fifth Day*.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Margoliouth, vol.2, *op.cit.*, p.196f.; italics in the original.

Armies of Birds out of the Waters rise.
And soaring mount towards the smiling Skies.
Here skipping Fishes cut the lambent Air,
There living Castles mighty things declare;
And swiftly rolling through the spacious Main,
This Day proclaim, with all their finny Train.

In the poem above, Traherne is not interested in particular names or classifications. He wants us to go beyond the conventional truth-level and to approach the Absolute truth-level. His desire is that we might sense the Presence which underlies all that is temporary. Later in this study, further reference will be made to non-dual devotion as a counterpoint to a strongly Absolute level of discourse. Such interests are implicit in my following poem.

Today could be Saturday

I clap because I must clap.
I sway because I must sway.
I laugh because I must laugh.
I dance because I must dance.
And sometimes, just sometimes,
I enter the vibrant present tense,
as clear-eyed as a salmon,
as spacious as a cloudless sky.

One without boundaries

The Eckhartian relationship between the divine and the human is distinguishable, yet indivisible. I have mentioned this paradox by using both ‘the language of identity’ and ‘the language of participation’. Eckhart’s assertion that God is One, with no distinction possible, relates to his use of *Grunt* with regard to God. In this ‘ground’, God is undifferentiated, and yet the ‘ground’ gives rise to the potentiality of the Trinity. It also allows for the mysterious oneness of the soul within the Trinitarian differentiation. The clearest exposition of the ‘workings’ of the Trinity comes in German Sermon 39. Eckhart does not provide a picture of a hierarchic Father in heaven who might inadvertently generate a male-oriented idolatry here on earth. The following is an extract from Frank Tobin’s translation of Sermon 39.

All that is in God moves him to give birth. His ground, his essence,
and his being all move the Father to give birth. ... Whenever the Son
appears in the soul, the love of the Holy Spirit also appears.
Therefore, I say: The Father’s being consists in giving birth to the Son;
the Son’s being consists in my being born in him and like him;
the Holy Spirit’s being lies in my catching fire in him and becoming
totally melted and becoming simply love. Whoever is thus inside of love
and is totally love thinks that God loves no one but him alone,
nor can he love anyone nor be loved by anyone than by him (God) alone.²²⁰

²²⁰ Cited in ed. McGinn, B., *op.cit.*, p.298.

But humanity can only have access to the *Grunt* when ‘knowing’ gives way to a complete ‘unknowing’. Only then can God’s ‘ground’ and the soul’s ‘ground’ be treated as ‘one ground’. McGinn writes that Eckhart uses *Grunt* variously, but with one end in view, namely, to characterize the ‘simple One’ as including both God and humanity.²²¹ If Eckhart goes so far as to say that God and humanity share an ‘indistinct identity’, this is writing which attempts to write from God’s point of view. McGinn believes the *Grunt* metaphor (and synonym) to be a key to Eckhart’s thought, because of that to which *Grunt* gives rise. Outside the ‘ground’, the divine and the human could not relate to each other or be mystically united. It allows for a dynamic harmony and mutual participation. The liturgical tradition expresses this in the Doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer: ‘Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit... .’

In the following piece of writing, I have tried to blend the conventional desire for a soul mate with a desire to find the ultimate reflection of one’s face. The latter, in my imagining, is the unconditional non-dual face of the divine Mother or Father.

Come, Come. Go, Go.

This glance
charged with
direct desire,
intensity:
this impulse
— embracing,
embraceable —

²²¹ *ibid.*, p.47.

Traherne and Julian also tend to support the unconventional teaching that we will emerge from this relative life as ‘one with God’ in some sense. We are invited to the experience-able (*erfahrbar*) truth (or the Realization; the affective actualization) that God (from God’s perspective?) is not a ‘being’ or ‘person’ outside us. It is important to note that when the Eckhartian soul is ‘voided’ of all things pertaining to creatureliness, it *reverts* to a form of identification with God. McGinn states that the language of identification, or of indistinction, represents the dialectical and inadequate play of language.²²³ McGinn precedes some of his translations with this *caveat*: ‘Of course, from the perspective of the soul’s created being there is no mutuality at all - pure existence has nothing in common with nothing’.²²⁴ Well-known Eckhartian phrases, such as those below, must therefore be regarded by McGinn as hyperbolic. I would tend to see them as theopoetic statements of trans-identification which are intended to underscore a theme of non-separation.

The eye in which I see God
is the same eye in which God sees me.
My eye and God’s eye is one eye²²⁵ and one seeing,
one knowing, and one loving.

You must know in reality that this is one and the same thing –
to know God and to be known by God,
to see God and to be seen by God.

²²³ In *The Mystical Thought ...*, *op.cit.*, p.99.

²²⁴ *ibid.*, p.149.

²²⁵ An Eckhartian-style aphorism from the tradition of *Advaita Vedānta* is as follows: ‘I am one eye in the big Eye of consciousness’. *Advaita Vedānta* is discussed in chapters four and five of the present study.

Aware of the limits of language, Eckhart's readers - McGinn infers - need to grasp that, in some way, they are in a continuous state of union with God. But then, they also need to see that this union '... is not an *experience* in any ordinary sense of the term – it is coming to realize and live out of the ground of experience, or better, of consciousness'.²²⁶

Among writers in English, the twentieth century renaissance in Eckhartian studies was led by Carl Kelley who translates short sections, around which he builds the claim that Eckhart consciously writes from 'God's standpoint'. Kelley appears eager to state, and to re-state, that Eckhart sees a real distinction between God and the self, from the human point of view. And yet when Eckhart adopts God's standpoint, Kelley has to concede that Eckhart can write: 'In truest reality there is no duality'.²²⁷ Again, writing from God's perspective, Eckhart can make the extraordinary statement that 'the finite is the infinite'.²²⁸ According to Kelley, this does not compromise the otherness of God. The Eckhartian understanding of God can be spelt out as 'Pure Spirit, unconditioned Isness, infinite Selfhood, the unlimited Knower ... or the divine Self, which is identically the unrestricted Principle'.²²⁹

Kelley draws out Eckhart's distinction between 'is-ness' (MHG: *Isticheit*, or, in the L sermons *esse*) and 'essence'. It is more common, in any translation from Latin, to render *esse* as 'being'. I have mentioned 'intellect' in Eckhart, and his placement of 'intellect' above 'being'. Whether

²²⁶ *ibid.*

²²⁷ See *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (1st ed. 1977) Kelley, C.F., Dharma Café & Frog Books, Berkeley, CA, 2009, p.149.

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ *ibid.*, p.64.

or not *esse* is rendered as ‘is-ness’ or ‘being’, it precedes ‘essence’ and is higher than it. On the other hand, since ‘essence’ is the seed of all manifestation and is grounded in ‘is-ness’, it can be said to be identical with it. But it is only within ‘the One’ (or the indivisible and all-inclusive Principle) that ‘essence’ is identical with ‘is-ness’.

German Sermon 6 became controversial because it includes the following: ‘What is life? God’s being is my life. If my life is God’s being, then God’s existence must be my existence and God’s is-ness is my is-ness, neither less nor more’.²³⁰ According to Kelley, the *manifestations* of ‘is-ness’ should be characterized as ‘differentiated’ essence. He writes: ‘But the undifferentiated essence itself contains the differentiated, as the infinite contains the finite’.²³¹ And so, to blithely claim (supposedly with Eckhart) that ‘my innermost Self is God’ is tantamount to ignoring Eckhart’s discriminative precision. ‘For him (Eckhart) the essence of ignorance is to superimpose finiteness upon God and divinity upon the finite’.²³² Kelley concludes by averring that the relation of the manifestations to God is a *real relation* (my italics) yet from God’s standpoint ‘... there are not two separate realities ...’.²³³

Eckhart’s position remains difficult, for Kelley as a translator is obliged to translate Eckhart’s most radical statement is as follows:

I, without my temporal self, always am. I am eternally in God.
And inasmuch as that which is in God is not other than God,

²³⁰ Colledge & McGinn, *op.cit.*, p.187.

²³¹ Kelley, C.F., *op.cit.*, p.154.

²³² *ibid.*, p.49.

²³³ *ibid.*, p.163.

then in principle my truest *I* (or innermost Self) is God.²³⁴

Other controversial remarks include: 'I am the Son and not other.' And also: 'It is true that there, where I am in principle, there are no distinctions.' But Kelley manages to describe such declarations as 'elliptic statements'. They 'do not represent an ontological opinion'.²³⁵ Eventually, it is true, Eckhart qualifies the radical note. Here again is a translation by Kelley.

In God there is nothing but God; in ourselves, however,
we consider all things in an ascending scale, from good to better
and from better to best. But in God is neither more nor less.
He is just the simple, pure, essential Truth.²³⁶

Ambiguity is evident when language is so stretched that Eckhart can declare humanity to be of the same essence (*essentia*) as God. But again, Eckhart makes a distinction between essence and 'is-ness' (*Isticheit* or *esse*). The 'isness' precedes and is higher than the 'essence'. Only from the divine standpoint can essence and 'is-ness' be identical. And so, *from this standpoint*, Eckhart appears to conclude that each person can be of the same essence as God.

In a foreword to the 2009 edition of Kelley, William Stranger offers a warning. He writes:

... it is extremely important to understand that we cannot simply
choose to be identified with God – a will-less event that by definition
no ego can willfully accomplish. Although Eckhart calls us to
'think principally', his non-dual teachings do not relieve us

²³⁴ *ibid.*, p.68.

²³⁵ *ibid.*, p.168.

²³⁶ *ibid.*

of the necessity of the profound moral, religious, and, eventually,
spiritual preparatory disciplines required of all true aspirants,
however apparently dualistic such a submission might appear to be.²³⁷

In my view, it appears that McGinn is comfortable with Eckhart's non-dualism but Kelley is nervous about this trend in Eckhart's thought. Further, that Kelley is reluctant to concede affinities with any form of sub-continental philosophy.

Be that as it may, Eckhart cites NT passages which might allude to a relative absence in the primitive church of dualistic thought. He mentions passages in Matthew, Luke and John in which Jesus seems to imply that children are at one with the divine. As a child might naturally extend its arms to find the embrace of her mother or father, so Eckhart advocates *epektasis* on the part of adults. Literally, the word means 'a stretching forward', in this case toward the divine embrace. He quotes from Paul's letter to the Philippians: 'Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead ...'.²³⁸

Kearney²³⁹ considers that 'the dis-possessed soul, emptied of ego and naked as a child ... becomes a lodging for the in-dwelling of God.' Kearney is here reflecting on the journal of Etty Hillesum, who died in the Holocaust. In so doing, he states his Eckhartian aspiration to

²³⁷ *ibid.*, p. xviii f.

²³⁸ Phil. 3:13, NRSV.

²³⁹ 2001, *op.cit.*, p.108.

‘allow the infinite to beget itself in my persona’. Alluding to Eckhart’s use of the ‘outward’ and ‘inward’ person, he writes:

The inner person is the divine ‘word of Eternity’ giving birth to itself in us. Using the illustration of the swinging door, (Eckhart) explains:

‘A door swings to and fro through an angle. I compare the breadth of the door to the outward man and the hinge to the inner person.

When the door swings to and fro, the breadth of the door moves back and forth, but the hinge is still unmoved and unchanged.’ ...

The most curious thing about this passage (Eckhart’s discussion of disinterest) is, arguably, that while God seems identical with Himself as ‘*he-who-is*’, this does not, as we might expect, rule out the possibility of human beings identifying with God by attaining to this same inner point of silent, still disinterest. On the contrary, it secures it.²⁴⁰

The reference to ‘he-who-is’ (above) relates to Yahweh’s disclosure to Moses on Mount Horeb in Ex. 3:14. The Hebrew of the verse is widely accepted as inconclusive. The declaration by Yahweh can be translated as ‘I Am That I Am’ (KJV) or ‘I Will Be Who I Will Be.’ The NRSV has: ‘God said to Moses, *I Am Who I Am*.’²⁴¹ The *I Am* became pivotal for both Judaic and Christian theologizing.²⁴² Judaism became committed to a relationship between Yahweh and humanity, and committed to a union of humanity with the wider created world. For its part,

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.120f.

²⁴¹ Transliterated, the Hebrew is: *Eheieh asher Eheieh*. If the second *Eheieh* is taken as a reflection or manifestation of the first *Eheieh*, then it might appear that a dualism is presupposed, as between a single element and the manifestation of that element. In Christian thought, a possible dualism is more evident, as when the ‘Father’ or unmanifested Reality finds manifestation in the ‘Son’.

²⁴² The *I Am* (*aham asi*) was perhaps already a pivotal expression within Hinduism. In a cosmology wherein everything perpetually dissolves and is re-made, only the *I Am* can be regarded as abiding for ever. In Hindu understandings, the primordial *I Am* is found (or rather, re-found) within the affective experience of Self-realization *in this moment*. Since polarity would appear to be necessary for an experience *of* something, the experience of *I Am* need not necessarily be viewed as either monistic *or* dualistic. For present purposes, I am tending to equate the *I Am* with the *Ātmā* or the Self (capital ‘S’).

Christianity's story of incarnation led it to a more horizontally-conceived union of the infinite with the finite. Earlier, reflection on the *I Am* had led to an expansion of the field of the ethical. In addition to asking: 'What should I do?' Semitic groups (and, before them, Indian *rishis*) began to ask: 'What should I *be*?'²⁴³ I have mentioned Rublev's vision of a world subsumed in *perichoretic* love, expressed in his icon *The Holy Trinity*. Rublev's interest in those who saw his icon can be imagined: what will become of them? Or rather, what will they become? In addition to asking 'What is it right to do?' Rublev asks the ontological question 'What is it good to be?'²⁴⁴

Kearney prefers the following variant translation of Ex. 3:14: 'I am who I may be'.²⁴⁵ He states that '... most orthodox theologies read the Exodus passage as the mark of absolute *separateness* between a transcendent God and transient humans eager to grasp his name'.²⁴⁶ By contrast, Eckhart 'appears to claim a radical *identity* between the two. The human person who abandons its own outer will and enters fully into the desert of its own emptiness becomes one with the Godhead of God.'²⁴⁷ Kearney's reading of Eckhart's interpretation of this emptiness (or disengagement from self-interest) could be paraphrased as follows: 'Whatever the business

²⁴³ The Gospel of John conveys a picture of Jesus as entering such a deep experience of Spirit that he discovers himself to be, beyond regular names and forms, a participant in the *I Am*. So-called mystics have long enjoined that we should faithfully attend to a such a consciousness of *I Am* for ourselves. Far from engendering self-preoccupation, this attention-giving is held to result in an experiential sense of inseparability from the divine and from all creatures.

²⁴⁴ Praying before the icons, the Orthodox worshipper salutes the departed saints as '... guests come to the sacramental feast, as in Christ all live and are not separated.' This is the view of the inestimable writer Nikolai Gogol (d.1852). See his *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy*, Holy Trinity Monastery Press, Jordanville, NY, 1952 & 1985, p.20.

²⁴⁵ Kearney adds that the divine '... seems to say something like this: *I am who I may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice*' (*ibid.*, p.37f.)

²⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.121.

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*

of a person's outer life, it is possible for the inner life to be characterized by silence and by a disinterest in the personal outcomes of one's outer business.' Such a truism could have come from Śaṅkarā's doctrinal *Advaita Vedānta*,²⁴⁸ or from Ramana Maharshi (d.1950), a twentieth century exponent of experiential *Advaita Vedānta*. Aspects of Ramana's teaching, which I propose are pertinent to the present study, are discussed in chapters four and five.²⁴⁹

In this context of disengagement (or is it abandonment?) there is the question as to whether Eckhart advocates a form of personal annihilation. It seems notable to me that although Gal. 2:20 has been included in the lectionaries of the established churches for centuries, the implications of the verse are readily bypassed. The verse reads: 'I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me; and my present bodily life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed himself for me'.²⁵⁰ Eckhart quotes this verse in abbreviated form, although not often. Twice, he follows it immediately with part of Phil. 1:21: 'For to me life is Christ...'.²⁵¹ A literal version of the Greek of the non-dual core of Gal. 2:20 can read as follows: '... I now live, no longer I...'. To draw out the meaning, it might be useful to express it as follows: 'in the follower of Christ, it is Christ who exists.'

²⁴⁸ *Advaita* has proved to be the most influential of the various *Vedāntic* schools. *Advaita* puts forward the view that the universe is indivisibly a unity and therefore non-dual. Within such a view of reality, the divine is frequently conceived as neither totally identical with the rest of reality, nor individually separate from it. Initially expressed in the *Upanishads* (and in the explanatory text *Mandukya Karika*) *Advaita* was given extensive exposition by Śaṅkara (d. ca. 820). A standard treatise on *Advaita* is attributed to him. It is *The Crown Gem of Discrimination* (Skt. *Vivekachudamani*).

²⁴⁹ Ramana Maharshi followed the tradition of Śaṅkara in repeatedly referring to the false identification of the 'I' with the body, mind or senses. For example: 'The real Self is the infinite 'I'. That 'I' is perfection. It is eternal. It has no origin and no end. The other 'I' is born and also dies. It is impermanent.' Quotation from: *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Godman, D., ed.) Penguin/Arkana, London, 1985, p.74.

²⁵⁰ Gal. 2:20, REB.

²⁵¹ REB.

Is a form of personal annihilation involved here? If so, does Eckhart subscribe to this? Such a condition might seem absurd to a materialist; it is not necessarily absurd to a secular mind, if understood as an ‘extension’ of a Christian materialism which treats the idea of incarnation seriously. When an Eckhartian perspective is applied to the Galatians passage, it could be said that the soul recovers its ‘emptiness’ or ‘nothingness’. This occurs through the surrender implied in Eckhart’s ‘releasement’. Within this process, the soul finds its union with God; or rather, the soul reverts via ‘emptiness’ to that unity for which it was created.²⁵²

To avoid limiting the concept of mysticism to experiences of feeling, the category of consciousness is best understood as extending beyond experience. McGinn makes this clear when discussing Eckhart’s ‘indistinct union with God’ in terms of intellect as well as love. If and when God gives the gift of God’s presence, it is not possible to distinguish knowing from loving.

There is no apprehension of God as object here;
rather, the divine presence becomes active in the soul’s ground
of awareness. So too there is no loving God as an object of desire,
but only a co-presence of infinite divine love.
This new affective state is conscious, that is, present to the subject,
but not yet explicitly known or objectified.

²⁵² Various writers have linked surrender and union with that aspect of evolution which might be moving us forward toward higher consciousness and deeper communion. The following quotation is from Barbara Fiand. ‘Self-surrender and subsequent union for the sake of greater complexity has been the evolutionary story of the universe from its beginning. ... We might say that, in us, this cosmic ‘love story of union toward greater consciousness’ longs to express itself in total awareness, in a universal, all embracing yes that allows for full realization.’ Fiand, B., *Awe-Filled Wonder: The Interface of Science and Spirituality*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 2008, p.29. For an interdisciplinary study which assiduously connects a kenotic Christology with evolution, see Claire Deane-Drummond’s *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom*, SCM Press, London, 2009. A theodramatic framework allows Deane-Drummond to engage with evolutionary change from a participant’s viewpoint and to bring Christology and science into proximity.

It can become known, but only in an indirect way
as a tendency or drive, not as something capable of conceptualization,
because of its unlimited and unrestricted nature.²⁵³

McGinn attempts a summary of Eckhart. He sees him as directing people to ‘... become aware of the indistinct union with God always present in the *Grunt* (innermost depth) of the soul’.²⁵⁴

McGinn continues:

Since God exists ‘without a why’ (*sunder war umbe*),
the life lived out of an awareness of indistinction from God
is spoken of as a life ‘without a why’.
Eckhart spoke of such a mode of life in a number of ways,
including the spontaneity of love:
‘He who dwells in the goodness of his nature, dwells in God’s love,
and love has no why.’ This kind of ‘whyless’ love
is described as pure, unmixed and perfectly detached.
... German Sermon 82 comments on this transcendental mode
of loving by noting that God is Nothing (*niht*),
neither ‘this nor that that one can speak about.’
Rather, as Eckhart puts it, ‘He is a being above all being.
He is a being without a mode of being,
and therefore the way in which one should love him
is without a why; he is beyond all speech.’
... The non-duality of love of God, however,
is not other than the non-duality of intellect
as identical with God in the ground.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ McGinn, B., ‘Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal’, in *Spiritus* 1: 2008, Baltimore, Maryland, p.51.

²⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.54.

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*

If I am nervous about the role of metaphor and metamorphosis in theopoetry, this might reflect my ‘Western’ conditioning by the competing traditions of Greek and Judeo-Christian thought. Eckhart sees the issue here; he uses the trajectories of both traditions, like rockets which intersect without colliding. This tilts him towards the necessity of mystical hypothesising. He knows that anything other than imaginative theo-poems are likely to result in attempts to objectify the divine. Is Eckhart compelling for this reason? At its ambiguous best, Eckhartian theo-philosophy bears a resemblance, of sorts, to the following modern apologia for *Advaita Vedānta*.

The only true Subject is the consciousness; no ‘objects’ as such exist,
for they appear only in and as part of that consciousness.
Also, because of their constantly changing nature,
the objects have no inherent reality. If *advaita* has any tenet,
then surely this is it. Because this consciousness is on its own
and represents the Totality, it is necessarily our very Self –
a Self that is immortal, because it is prior to Time,
and infinite or immeasurable because it is prior to Space.²⁵⁶

In the following chapter, the distinctiveness of Julian is discussed with an eye to contextuality and intentionality. Her non-dual undercurrent is related to aspects of Eckhart and Traherne. Then, in chapters four and five, I shall have cause to discuss *Advaita Vedānta*, as expounded and exemplified by Ramana. His strong non-dualism counterpoints the moderate non-dualism of my three principal writers.

²⁵⁶ Powell, R., *Beyond Religion: Meditations on Our True Nature*, Blue Dove Press, San Diego, CA., 2001, p.46f.

Chapter Three: Mother Julian of Norwich

Transgressive Saints

1. Hadewijch of Antwerp, from a convent garden, 1233

My mind's clacking mill
grinds and grinds.
Words confound, ward off peace.

I stack wood, beat, mangle, peg clothes.
I moisten dry clay, turn damp earth,
tend beet, onion, turnip.

Silence: my true nature,
where nothing confuses your language, holy Mary,
Mother of us all.

Plum tree skeletons find green flesh.
Spring-time earth, water, sky,
invite surrender: separateness dissolves.
I relinquish speech for seven days,
rest in oneness
underlying sense, thought and word.

What is worth saying may be said without a tongue;
what is worth hearing, may be heard without ears.

I walk our north wall's length,
dwell within mystery near and far,
familiar, yet impossible to understand.
Campions, near the pond, beam pink light.
Sky turns sword-grey; the sea no longer glints
but heaves like a black bruise.

Here in the garden, five nuns, each widowed
to either plague or war. Last night, heavy with child,
a farm girl came to our gate. Mary,
Mother of rich earth, fair and dark sky:
we see your radiance in all things;
we see all things in you.

They say: *Divinity is beyond.*
But I hear of it in a storm's howl,
in the boom-boom of a torrent; today, in the rustling
of leaves shaken by a breeze. I fear the Bishop's censure.
Whether I starve, freeze, or burn at the stake,
I declare my trust: all will be well.

My ducks nod and waddle in my wake,
nuzzle fallow ground.
Here, see us, they say.
Look, you earnest Sister,
hoping to survive the stake,
look at us.
This *soil*;
that *worm*.

Trust belongs to a duck,
a farm child, a robust worker.
How can I find real trust?
I will go out again, confront
the place of my greatest fear
and meditate there.

Help me, Mother,
to forsake attachments
which beguile.
I want to flow with sap
of fidelity to all.

Hadewijch of Antwerp was a theopoet of the early thirteenth century. In my poem *Transgressive Saints* she is placed in a convent, which is not strictly accurate. Hadewijch and her community of Beguines chose an informal structure; they did not pursue the official approval of the Church. But, like a convent, her community was organized to pursue an ascetic and self-sufficient focus. There is no evidence that Julian of Norwich was familiar with the

seemingly sensualistic unitive tone in the writings of Hadewijch.²⁵⁷ But both writers take embodiment seriously, both literally and metaphorically, as a supreme divine gift. Their writings tend to be highly visual, direct, and not over-burdened with abstract concepts. Predictably, we have very little information about either woman. I intend to highlight the way in which Julian's themes are imbued with a non-dual tone. Along the way, her work will be reviewed in conjunction with that of Eckhart and Traherne.

Although Julian's background seems likely to remain opaque, it is obvious that she was highly educated, especially for a woman in medieval England. We know that wealthy women in Norfolk had access to books, because of the county's proximity to Cambridge. It is not known if she had access to *La Divina Commedia*. Since Dante lived at the same time as Eckhart, this is possible; Julian is thought by medievalists to have been familiar with Eckhart's work. Some would hold that she was influenced by it. Much remains unclear. But we might imagine her enthusiasm for such a passage in the *Commedia* as the following.

And all are blessed even as their sight descends
deeper into the truth, wherein rest is
for every mind. Thus happiness hath root
in seeing, not in loving, which of sight
is aftergrowth.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Cf. Hadewijch's spirit which '... sinks with frenzy in [the abyss] of Love's fruition'. Quotation from: *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans & intro by Mother Columba Hart, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1980, p.244.

²⁵⁸ *Paradiso*, canto 28.

Julian claims that some of the sixteen visions were seen with her physical eyes. Others were strong mental impressions, while a third grouping, which she calls 'spiritual', consisted of silent teachings 'in the heart'.

I desired many times to know in what was our Lord's meaning.
And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding,
and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing?
Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love.
What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love.²⁵⁹

In one of the visions, Julian sees something small and round 'resembling a hazelnut'. The small object enlarges her awareness that each item in creation is significant in its own right. But each item might also convey a message. The nut can therefore speak to Julian of womb-like fruitfulness and of the preservation of life through love's close attention. As with the nut, so with humanity; Julian states that all of us are enclosed or enfolded in love. I once visited her reconstructed cell: a small enclosure, with openings both to the interior of the church and to the exterior world. I doubt that Julian would have regarded her years of confinement as a retreat from life. More likely, she saw them as an opportunity to be attentive to her many visitors and to hone the different versions of her one extended theoparticipatory communication poem.

One of the themes in Julian's work is that of 'enclosure'. This interweaves her pastoral concern. She believes she has experienced the enclosure of divine love. In turn, she has desired to enclose that love so that she might encompass it within her whole personhood. She repeatedly writes that divine love is all-encompassing, implying that it is simultaneously

²⁵⁹ *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, LT 86. Trans. E., Colledge, & J., Walsh, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1978, p.342.

immanent and transcendent. The ‘object resembling a hazelnut’ occurs in LT 5 of *Showings*.

Later in the same chapter, Julian states that:

... our good Lord revealed that it is very greatly pleasing to him
that a simple soul should come naked, openly and familiarly.
For this is the loving yearning of the soul through the touch
of the Holy Spirit.²⁶⁰

As with Traherne and Eckhart, Julian emphasizes personal experience. If pressed, they will place spiritual experience ahead of abstract truth. But since their tendency is non-dual, they are not going to create *another dualism*, in which conceptualization and experience are opposed to each other!²⁶¹ Traherne’s non-dualism can be nominated as ‘experiential’. Relatively speaking, the non-dualism of Julian and Eckhart can be described as ‘more conceptual’. But such labeling is not always helpful. The tendency to categorize our ‘ways of belief’ is often a precursory move, along the path to excessive dualism.

As to their understanding of the Trinity, all three writers make use of the traditional tripartite approach. But there are variations. The divine is configured as triune and humankind is assumed to be reflective of this. The Father (maker and knower) and the Son (doer and sufferer) and the Holy Spirit (lover and bliss-giver) are reflected in human nature as body, soul and spirit. Julian puts forward two distinctive versions of the Trinity, in addition to an implied reiteration of the tradition.

²⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.184.

²⁶¹ Since my own prejudice is in favour of *experience* over *conceptualization*, I need to be careful not push the two apart. A fundamental opposition of ‘experience’ and ‘doctrine’ is hardly likely to prove coherent for any recognizable spiritual tradition.

First, she says that because we bear the image of God, we have the ability to see *truth*, contemplate *wisdom* and delight in *love*. These three abilities of truth, wisdom and love correspond to the ‘persons’ of the Trinity. Truth corresponds to the Father, wisdom to the Son, and love’s manifestation to the Holy Spirit.²⁶² But Julian does not imply that the three abilities are independent of each other. Although God is triune, neither Father, Son nor Spirit is engaged in any activity which is separate from the activity of the other two.

Second, Julian puts forward a version of the Trinity which is even more distinctive, in that it partially subverts the ‘gender’ of the Trinity. Her preferred Trinity seems to be that of Father, Mother and ‘Good Lord’. This threesome is nonetheless one divinity. Julian also uses the word ‘Love’ as an implied synonym for the divine. If ‘Love’ was absent to any degree, evil would fill the void. But ‘Love’ is not ultimately distressed by evil. This is because the apparent ‘opposites’ have been (from ‘before the foundation of the world’) brought together in Christ. To some degree Julian puts forward a theology of coinherence. The divine is readily ‘available’ or ‘accessible’ in Christ. The divine is ‘before us’ (in front of us, *now*) and within us, yet beyond us. Here then is Julian’s non-dual predilection: she brings God and humanity into conjunction.

As mentioned, Julian’s non-dualism might be regarded as more conceptual than Traherne’s, despite the graphic nature of Julian’s imagery. In the first chapter, I cited poems by Traherne in which he objects to an overdrawn subject/object dualism. Eckhart (chapter two, above)

²⁶² This is the place to offer the following speculation: my writers regard the Trinity, less as a normative teaching than as a suggestive interpretation. They consider the Trinity, not so much as a *theologoumenon* but as a theopoem to be experienced.

markedly reduces the subject/object dualism when ‘the birth of the Son takes place in the soul’. This ‘birth’ implies a ‘death’ to the self (small ‘s’). To put an end to humanity’s restless suffering, there must be an *end* to the self (as perceived by itself to be a separate entity). This might paradoxically imply that a personal self did not substantially exist in the first place. But it would seem more likely that Eckhart accepted an initial dualism. Otherwise, how could we freely choose detachment? And, without initial dualism, why would Eckhart be so devoted to the realization of our return to the primordial Oneness of the divine?

Julian is distinctive in her way of imagining God; her extensive use of female imagery for the divine is widely known. Aspects of her imagery are woman-centred and naturalistic. To use a postmodern phrase, she ‘writes womanhood’. She does so in a limited way, but in a way that is striking for a medieval European. By contrast, Eckhart is cautious of the *via positiva*, believing that metaphor piled upon metaphor would contribute to distortion. His *via negativa* is recognition that the ‘Godhead beyond God’ cannot be described because it is unknowable. But Eckhart’s intention is far from reducing the divine to a non-personal, abstract symbol. The point for him, in this regard, is that a spiritual life does not consist of knowledge in the head. Julian and Traherne concur with Eckhart here. A ‘consciously-lived’ life has priority. By this I mean a life that is both aware and ethical. Ideas ‘about’ God are secondary; they remain important, and they retain an important link to the imagination.

Divine maternity

A phrase from Julian which has entered the Western lexicon occurs in *Showings* (LT 27) and elsewhere: ‘... but all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.’ This and other expressions of hope are grounded in what she believes to be her divinely-instigated experience of the depth and breadth of God’s love. From this position, she encourages me to love my own embodied self, otherwise my love for the rest of creation will be tainted with my own lack of self-love. Julian repeatedly questions God as to his reasons for allowing sin and suffering. It is in this context of questioning that the consoling words ‘all will be well’ occur.

Relative to her era, Julian might de-emphasize sin, yet is careful to state that her model of spiritual life includes both Fall and Redemption. She registers surprise that her visions have downplayed the ultimate impact of sin.

But I did not see sin, for I believe that it has no kind of substance,
no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pain caused by it.
And it seems to me that this pain is something for a time, for it purges
and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy²⁶³

Julian proceeds to reiterate that Christ asks me, not to dwell on what might or might not be sinful, but to open myself to his embrace. She wants me to experience full ‘enclosure’. She writes: ‘And of his great courtesy he puts away all our blame, and regards us with pity and

²⁶³ LT 27, p.225.

compassion as innocent and guiltless children'.²⁶⁴ Julian seems to imply that human nature is basically good, if weak. The weakness is an occasion for growth; sin itself can awaken humanity to the original goodness of Creation. In LT 49, Julian writes: '...our Lord God in his goodness makes the contrariness, which is in us now, very profitable for us'.²⁶⁵

It is important to note that when Julian brings humanity and God into conjunction, she assumes that any human move toward the divine is not a later gift, but part of human nature from the beginning. Here she reveals that her sympathy lies more with humankind's divinization than with any tendency of the Western church to over-emphasize human sinfulness.

To be human, for Julian, is to be already utterly immersed in God's creation *as part of him*. ... We need do nothing, undertake nothing, venture nothing, except the final recognition of and assent to *what actually is*.
... Salvation is found in our true created natures; salvation is a restoration, not an innovation – a return to our true and original participation in the Holy Trinity.²⁶⁶

Traherne is similar to Julian here; both maintain that the relationship between God and humanity does not begin with sin and end with redemption. There is immense love, within the divine, before sin 'arrives' and 'during sin', as well as in the traditional redemptive acts themselves.

... everything is penetrated, in length and in breadth, in height

²⁶⁴ LT 28, p.227.

²⁶⁵ LT 49, p.265.

²⁶⁶ John Swanson, writing in *Julian: Woman of our Day*, edited by Robert Llewelyn, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1985, p.79f.

and in depth without end; and it is all one love. // But now I should say
a little more about this penetration, as I understood our Lord to mean:
How we are brought back by the motherhood of mercy and grace
into our natural place, in which we were created by the motherhood of love,
a mother's love that never leaves us.²⁶⁷

God's motherhood is not mentioned in Julian's first reflection upon her visions (ST). Years later, her much fuller reflections (LT) develop both her sensibility of identification with Christ and her unusual elaboration of motherhood as a primary attribute of God. Both strands are non-dualistic, to a point. Julian's identification with the crucifixion leads her to identify with Christ's love for the world; she develops confidence in the oneness brought about, as she saw it, by the divine condescension of incarnation. She does not use the words 'interconnected' or 'integrated'. But she does use the word 'wholeness'. And she repeatedly employs the words 'one', 'one-ing' and 'oneness'.

The second part of my poem *Transgressive Saints* concerns a woman who, like Hadewijch of Antwerp, followed an ascetical Christian life without recourse to anything churchly.

Transgressive Saints

2. Simone Weil at Saint-Marcel d'Ardèche

She bends in opaque light, in heat-blaze;
picks grapes, prunes thoughts and words.
A hare crouches near the vines:
fully attentive, no muscular effort,
no brow-wrinkling concentration.

²⁶⁷ LT 59 & 60, p.297.

The vines' silent liturgy: stem, branch,
stalk, leaf. Attend the planet's rhythm, repeat
the Rhône Valley's quiet recitation of pure grape,
nine hours each day.

In borrowed cape and boots, Simone
pursues her life's anomaly: to crave for less,
achieve peace with loss of all sense
of presence. *Truth is conveyed by what's withheld.*

Attend, recite, repeat: stem, stalk, sap.
She picks her way into autumn,
the body's rhythm. Snip this tangle,
snap tendril; shift away from words.
A brace of ravens waddles down a furrow,
lunges at each songbird. Nature's daily work;
truth of world as is.

*I'd rather be an atheist with passion
for Earth than a consoled Christian.*
Give up self-questioning, abandon
the search. Relinquish the mind's
mythographic cast. Accept the void
of letting-be.

*It is not for me to seek, or even to believe
in God. I have only to refuse belief
in gods that are not God.*

Each pilgrim vine is circumscribed yet wayward;
each cluster blazing purple in light,
cold black in shade.
*A matter of seeing deeper, penetrating truth.
Only the lived reality has point.*

Can trellises entwine the vine?
Then excise all belief: face emptiness.
Expose the mesh of long-held shibboleths;
defy the grid imposed upon
the world's real labour.

Grace Jantzen and Patricia Donohue-White approach Julian's use of divine motherhood with caution, and not simply because a motherhood ideal can be oppressive. Jantzen finds that

Julian's motifs of divine maternity are integral to a theology which reflects both personal experience and Church teachings. But the real question, Jantzen asserts, '... is whether Christian theology has any implications for psychology; whether salvation remains purely theoretical ... or whether there can be genuine spiritual healing and fulfillment in our relationship with Christ in this life'.²⁶⁸

Donohue-White seems to reluctantly endorse the motherhood motifs. She writes:

Although Julian does not diversify her female images of God into sister, midwife, or female lover, she does identify God's maternity with God's wisdom; thus she places her theology, knowingly or not, squarely within the Sophia tradition with its personification of divine wisdom in female form, a form that includes but is not limited to the symbol of maternity.²⁶⁹

Donohue-White has no doubt that Julian '... intentionally counters patriarchal models of a God of wrath and judgment'. Julian does this by her '... constant focus on God as love and her portrayal of God's love as all-encompassing, all-sustaining, and all-renewing...'.²⁷⁰ It could be argued that Julian's reduced emphasis on sin downplays human responsibility. But another interpretation could be this: she assumes that putative readers are likely to be disposed towards a spiritually-oriented life. Julian writes: 'This, then, was my astonishment, that I saw our Lord

²⁶⁸ Jantzen, G.M., *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2000 ed., p.124.

²⁶⁹ Donohue-White, P., 'Reading Divine Maternity in Julian of Norwich', in *Spiritus* 5:2005, Baltimore, MD, p.25.

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

God showing no more blame to us than if we were as pure and as holy as the angels in heaven'.²⁷¹

Julian's references to the motherhood of Christ appear especially in LT Chapters 57 to 63. Christ is our 'mother of mercy in taking our sensuality'.²⁷² Julian uses the word 'sensuality' in positive ways, to express my created nature and to underline Christ's humanity. Christ achieves for me the personal integration which is necessary for union with God.

... for in our Mother Christ we profit and increase,
and in mercy he reforms and restores us,
and by the power of his Passion, his death
and his Resurrection, he unites us to our substance.²⁷³

Julian provides a number of vivid examples of Christ's motherhood. Dying on a cross, Christ resembles a woman in labour, imparting life to us as a result of suffering. In LT 60, she writes that:

... all mothers bear us for pain and for death. O, what is that?
But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for
endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him
in love and travail, until the full time²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ LT 50, p.266.

²⁷² LT 58, p.294.

²⁷³ *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ LT 60, p.298.

Julian invites me to see the Passion of Christ as resembling my own physical birth. As I am squeezed from my mother's womb, so the life of Christ is squeezed out from him, in order for another life to come to birth. Having been 'birthed by Christ', I am also 'a member of Christ', born into the life which lies beyond the confinement of individualistic self-consciousness.

Another example of Christ's motherhood is seen when he nourishes me in the Eucharist, with his own substance, as a woman will nourish her baby from her own body. Again, in LT 60, Julian writes:

The mother can give her child to suck of her milk,
but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself,
and does, most courteously and most tenderly,
with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life.²⁷⁵

Finally, Christ cleans me, as a mother will clean her baby. This seems to mean that Christ welcomes me into his arms, regardless of behaviour. A degree of radicalism is expressed, not only in the thought of Christ as birth-mother, but in Julian's doubt concerning traditional expressions of divine wrath. In LT 46, she describes God as:

...that goodness which cannot be angry, for God is nothing but goodness. ...
For our soul is so wholly united to God, through his own goodness,
that between God and our soul nothing can interpose.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*

²⁷⁶ LT 46, p.259.

She implies that her outlook is orthodox.²⁷⁷ Dramatically, however, she can venture a most unorthodox viewpoint.

And I saw no difference between God and our substance,
but, as it were, all God; and still my understanding accepted
that our substance is in God, that is to say, that God is God,
and our substance is a creature in God.
... And the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother,
in whom we are enclosed.²⁷⁸

In Middle English, the word ‘substance’ possibly conveys the idea of ‘potential’, as well as ‘essence’. Whatever her purport, Julian fails to adequately qualify her use of ‘substance’. But she manages the puzzlement of her non-dual statements by being clear that on the relative level of ordinary experience, Christians need to continue with the traditional spiritual practices or disciplines. So that, although a Christian might be confident that she or he shares the ‘one substance’ of God, this absolute level of discourse must be actively balanced by the relative level of discourse. It is possible to construe a third or intermediate level, wherein God’s lovers are seen to be living ‘in real time’ poised between between the ‘already complete or realized’ and the ‘not yet’ of expectation. Accordingly, in Julian, there is *both* unitive experience and the necessity to be engaged with the quotidian world of differentiation. From a poet’s viewpoint, I feel that she saw the believer’s interaction with the world as the spontaneous outflow of the non-dual intuition of non-separation.

²⁷⁷ ST 1-2 and 33 but especially LT 33.

²⁷⁸ LT 54, p.285.

Julian was perhaps familiar with Anselm's references to the motherhood of Christ. Among Anselm's prayers is a lengthy 'Prayer to St. Paul' in which he praises Paul's mothering of those who had been brought to faith in Christ. Then Anselm switches from addressing Paul and begins to talk to Jesus.

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
Are you not the mother who, like a hen,
gathers her chickens under her wings?
Truly, Lord, you are a mother;
for both they who are in labour
and they who are brought forth
are accepted by you.
You have died more than they, that they may labour to bear.
It is by your death that they have been born,
for if you had not been in labour,
you could not have borne death;
and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth.²⁷⁹

According to Sr. Mary Paul it is 'very likely' that Julian knew the *Ancrene Riwe* of the early thirteenth century.²⁸⁰ A textbook of the reclusive life, the *Riwe* uses a mother-child metaphor for the relation of Christ to his followers. After noting the inadequacy of all words involved in the traditional picture-language of the Trinity, Mary Paul suggests that the name 'God the Mother' could be adopted for the 'third person' of the Trinity.

²⁷⁹ *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, trans. Sr. Benedicta Ward, 1973, p.153.

²⁸⁰ Paul, Sr. Mary, *All Shall Be Well: Julian of Norwich and the Compassion of God*, SLG Press, Convent of the Incarnation, Oxford, 1976, p.26.

I want to suggest that ‘God the Mother’ may be the true and meaningful name of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Person who is so vague in our theology, the Person whom we call the Holy Spirit, though these words do not in any way express the *proprium* of the third Person, for God the Trinity is Holy, and God the Trinity is Spirit, and each of the three Persons is Holy and is Spirit. The third Person seems to be the unnamed member of the Trinity. And it is not a matter of name only, but of function. The function of a mother is to be a life-giver: to bring to birth and to nurture. May it be that the whole creation is being brought to birth in the Holy Spirit?²⁸¹

Such discursiveness conceals the reality that Julian refers more frequently to God as Father than to God as Mother. Kathryn Reinhard can write that ‘Julian’s motherhood theology doesn’t replace a patriarchal God but completes him.’ Reinhard continues:

Julian describes God as Father and Mother, together, in a profoundly holistic way, which does not ignore or negate differences of gender but relies on difference and particularity in order to make a complete and creative union. As God’s creation and God’s children, *we* are the place where the particularities of the motherhood and fatherhood of God come together.²⁸²

Is this parental dualism subsumed within a clear non-dual conviction? It remains unclear. Julian is concerned with the understanding of those affective ideas which transform us. More

²⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.31.

²⁸² Reinhard, K.L., ‘Joy to the Father, Bliss to the Son: Unity and the Motherhood Theology of Julian of Norwich’, in *Anglican Theological Review* 89:4, 2007, Evanston, ILL, p.644.

mystical as a theologian that systematic, she favours the letters to the Corinthians rather than those to Rome and Galatia. All those who experience Christ's mothering are the recipients of divine secrets. This mystical move has the effect, in Julian, of disclosing God as more intimate than transcendent in the classical sense. Reinhard, for her part, concludes on a non-dual note.

In the womb of Christ our Mother we are reunited not only
with God our Father but also with each other. The love of God
that unites us so completely in the Trinity that we ourselves become
bearers of the Trinity also unites us to our brothers and sisters.
Like the hazelnut Julian saw held in God's hand, our relationships
are bound together in a round, tight wholeness, small and potentially
unstable, but united everlastingly, because God loves it.²⁸³

Reinhard brings her imagination to Julian's theopoetics. By contrast, Kerry Dearborn is less engaging; he observes that Julian places the self-giving nature of the divine within metaphors of both Motherhood and Fatherhood. Dearborn views Julian as constructing a somewhat orthodox *via media* between God's Motherly nature and the traditional position. Dearborn is confident:

She was clearly not attempting to move outside of scripture
and the church to create her own feminine language for God.
Her writing reveals that one need not revoke Jesus' normative use
of 'Father' as found in the Gospels to include also the use of 'Mother'.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ *ibid.*, p.645.

²⁸⁴ Dearborn, K., 'The crucified Christ as the motherly God: the theology of Julian of Norwich', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55:3, 2002, Cambridge University Press, pp.283 & 298.

But Dearborn concedes that Julian's contribution is distinctive wherever she links motherliness with the crucifixion, the Trinity, and the disciple's life 'in Christ'.

Her visions helped her to formulate theological reflections that challenge associations of the cross with a harsh and destructive patriarchal God. Her theology also challenges the idea that a motherly vision of God is purely subjective and distorts the biblical revelation of God. As numerous scholars have noted, there are clearly references in scripture to the motherly nature of God, which are all the more remarkable in light of the patriarchal cultures in which they were written.²⁸⁵

Enfolded by the Infinite

None of the writers at the centre of this study approve of escapist or pietistic religiosity. Transpersonal and communal engagement is always placed ahead of individualistic cultivation. This also applies, emphatically, to Ramana and Panikkar (discussed in chapters 4 and 5). An authentic spiritual life is a matter of living 'out of' the implications of a sense of (primordial?) Oneness. Among the Christians I discuss, Julian is the most explicit regarding the means by which humanity is 're-established' within Oneness. Julia Lamm offers the following summary of Julian's detailed descriptions.

Christ gave all that was in him, all that he was and all that he had,
to the point that there was nothing left but shredded remnants of his flesh,
which revealed the fullness of his humanity and love. Julian's originating

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p.297

revelation is thus essentially a *kenosis* – a self-emptying love,
an emptying of all that is human in Christ so that nothing remains hidden.²⁸⁶

Lamm favours the words ‘expose’ and ‘exposure’ as being potentially able to provide an adequate rendering of Julian’s Middle English ‘shewe’. The word ‘shewe’ (show) has generally been taken to mean ‘reveal’ or ‘disclose’. The idea of exposure, rather than that of revelation *simpliciter*, adds a fuller purport to the explicit treatment by Julian of the sufferings of Jesus. Lamm continues:

... just as she had seen Christ emptied and had seen everything in him
be exteriorized, so God will empty Godself through a ‘plenteous flowing’.
... The final revelation will be an opening of God’s very self
and a spilling forth, such that what had seemed exterior to God
is now immersed in God. ... Not only does revelation occur when God,
through *kenosis*, exteriorizes what had been interior,
but further revelation occurs when God interiorizes us,
enfolding and enclosing us.²⁸⁷

Julian wishes to safeguard God’s distinction while also declaring the divine to be ultimately inseparable from created humanity. She balances the absolute level of discourse with the relative level by repeating the two truths: human *destiny* is oneness with God; yet this oneness can be appropriated in the *present moment*. She knows that humanity cannot claim to have ‘grasped’ God through any belief concerning God. The divine cannot be grasped or understood, because it already creates, grasps, and understands *us*.

²⁸⁶ Lamm, J.A., ‘Revelation as Exposure in Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*’, in *Spiritus 5*: 2005, Baltimore, Md, p.60.

²⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.61.

Julian's non-dual tendency finds a well-known metaphor in 'knitting'. She uses knitting to draw attention to humanity's oneness with God (truth #1) and also to the process by which humanity is realizing oneness (truth #2). We are already 'oned' but yet still on the way to 'oneing'. Christ asks for *trust*. But this includes the horizontal movement of *trust in humanity* as 'enclosed' or 'enfolded' by Christ. The process of achieving unity is particularly inferred in LT 5. 'For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me'.²⁸⁸ We are 'oned' or united with God through a process of self-emptying on God's part. We in turn participate in the *kenotic* or self-emptying life of God.

When the simple soul by its will has become nothing for love,
to have him who is everything, then it is able to receive spiritual
rest. ... it is very greatly pleasing to him that a simple soul
should come naked, openly and familiarly.²⁸⁹

Julian's motif of enfoldment was taken up, curiously, by physicist David Bohm in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. Whereas, in mechanistic physics, two of the 'foundations' are extension and separation, this is not exactly the case with quantum physics. Bohm proposes the words 'implicate order' to characterize the dictum that 'everything is enfolded into everything'.²⁹⁰ The 'implicate order' is contrasted with the 'explicate order'. In the latter,

²⁸⁸ *Showings, op.cit.*, p.183.

²⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.184.

²⁹⁰ Bohm, D., *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Routledge Kegan Paul, London, 1983, p.177.

physical entities are accorded particular space and time for their *unfolding*, as distinct from Bohm's *enfolding*.

In the implicate order we have to say that mind enfolds
matter in general and therefore body in particular.
Similarly, the body enfolds not only the mind
but also in some sense the entire material universe.²⁹¹

In the quotation above, it is evident that Bohm believes that relationships (for example, between matter and consciousness and between body and mind) can be rendered more comprehensible through the interdependence expressed by the words 'implicate order'.

For her part, Julian writes (even in her early text) of a merging or assimilation with God: 'And the soul who thus contemplates is made like to him who is contemplated, and united to him in rest and peace.'²⁹² In the experience of merging, we become enlightened with what becomes our own light. This light is derived; it is a divine gift. But it does not remain external. Julian's developing non-dualism becomes clearer when she alludes to an organic fusion between our life and that of Christ.

Our good Lord revealed himself to his creature in various ways,
both in heaven and earth; but I saw him take no place
except in man's soul. ... He revealed himself several times reigning,
as is said before, but principally in man's soul;
he has taken there his resting place and honourable city.²⁹³

²⁹¹ *ibid.*, p.209.

²⁹² ST, *op.cit.*, p.164.

²⁹³ LT, *op.cit.*, 81, p.336f.

In her essay entitled 'Medieval Medical Views of Woman', Elizabeth Robertson offers this suggestion:

As far as I know, Julian's emphasis on the sensuality of Christ is distinctive.
... I suggest that Julian is speaking here not simply of a gender-neutral sensuality, but more specifically of women's sensuality; ... (this) ultimately resulted in a reassessment of the value of femininity.²⁹⁴

Robertson concludes:

I am inclined to believe that Julian of Norwich was a subtle strategist who sought to undo assumptions about women and to provide ... a new celebration of femininity through contemplation of Christ's feminine attributes.²⁹⁵

In my view, Julian struggles to affirm her true position. I think this becomes clear in the passage quoted earlier, concerning 'substance'. She appears to pay respect to the traditional viewpoint. At the same time, her experience urges her to a theopoetic of qualified non-dualism. Here again is part of the passage:

And I saw no difference between God and our substance,
but, as it were, all God; and still my understanding accepted
that our substance is in God, that is to say, that God is God ...²⁹⁶

The tension is almost palpable. In the next chapter of *Showings* she returns to the non-dual side of the tension. And she heightens it by adding the word 'sensuality'.

I saw with absolute certainty that our substance is in God,

²⁹⁴ Essay in Lomperis, L. & Stanbury, S., eds., *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, University of Pennsylvania Press, PA, 1993, p.157.

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.161.

²⁹⁶ *Showings*, *op.cit.*, LT 54, p.285.

and, moreover, that he is in our sensuality too.

The moment our soul was made sensual, at that moment
was it destined from all eternity to be the City of God.²⁹⁷

In Julian there is no distinct body/soul dualism. By contrast with other Western theologizing, she cannot separate our sensuality from our spirituality. To her, there is apparently no substance called ‘soul’ which can clearly be separated from our bodiliness. Julian’s positive regard for the body finds its culmination in the great sensual act of the Incarnation. This is the proof, to her, that humanity is inextricably linked to the divine.

Popularity

Julian’s non-dual emphasis connects, in my view, with her popularity in recent decades. Her non-reductionist approach to the body and its relationship to God has found resonance with today’s skepticism regarding ‘truths’ that seem to be purely propositional in character. For her, as for Eckhart and especially for Traherne, religion is a mode of thinking and acting which includes intuition and feeling. They understood the importance of feeling, where ‘feeling’ refers, not necessarily to bodily agitations of emotion, but to conscious affective responses. These responses are taken by Julian to constitute part of reason itself. So that, when her extended theopoem highlights ‘feelings’, her readers understand that she implies a *rational* appreciation of what is *felt*.

²⁹⁷ From the Clifton Wolters translation, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966, LT 55, p.159.

The sense of immediacy in Julian's work, plus the sense of *intimacy*, are surely factors in her popularity today. But I think the key to her acclaim is creative tension. She is struggling with tension between her professed adherence to a body of dogma and her actual experience. The latter underlies her theopoetic. To rephrase this in a different way, I think her appeal, and that of Traherne, relies on the 'vastness' which emerges from a contextual 'narrowness'. Julian reports an experience of the 'dropping away' of a confined, separate self. This 'dropping' occurs in the act of uniting with something else. She frames this experience as a vision of *agape*, which is the *kenotic* or self-emptying love which underpins everything. It is transformative love. On her view, the divine in the form of the Holy Spirit is forever able to bring everything into conformity to the *agape* of Christ. It is the Spirit's self-emptying which reconciles all humanity to the infinity of beauty, or rather, to the beauty of infinite love. This Spirit mysteriously conveys both death and life, and both are experienced by Julian as *kenotic*.²⁹⁸

Three 'mystics' as connected presences

Traherne and Eckhart seem aligned with Julian regarding the *kenotic* life. All three are concerned that I should transcend my confined, self-delusory character by abandoning my rigidly dualistic thought. There are two truths in play here. Wherever transformation is imagined, it is woven between conventional truth and absolute truth. For example, the kingdom

²⁹⁸ Apparent 'opposites' are relevant to a discussion about *Shiva Nataraja*, in chapter four of the present study.

of heaven (absolute level of truth) is within each person (conventional level of truth). The kingdom is eschatological (absolute truth level) and yet exists in the present moment (conventional truth level) as well as in the eschaton (absolute truth level). Full participation in that which is conveyed by the Spirit is not an ‘achievement’. It is a reversion to union with the divine. At the same time, the process of awakening to one’s true self will continue. Delusions and illusions will still need to fall away.²⁹⁹

As mentioned, Julian’s preferred Trinity seems composed of Father, Mother and Good Lord. The New Zealand medievalist Alexandra Barratt (2002) has published an original vignette on Julian’s ‘our good Lord’. Barratt demonstrates that Julian’s title for the Holy Spirit (‘our good Lord’) held a meaning which was specific to Julian’s time. It was ‘good lordship’ which generated harmony; the good lord would represent or in some way assist his citizens or clients in matters which might come before law courts. Barratt then alludes to the unique word *parakeletos* (advocate or intercessor) which is applied four times in John’s Gospel to the Holy Spirit. Transliterated into Latin as *paraclitus* and into English as ‘paraclete’, the word finds a precise parallel (Barratt argues) in the Julianic ‘our good Lord’ who brings closer together those who were formerly at odds. The disciple can now co-operate with the Spirit’s inner activity; narrowness can give way to vastness. The phenomenal self (small-s) will need to be dismantled, just as a concrete wall obscuring a garden might need to be dismantled. The true Self (capital-S) comes into view. It is notable that this eternal, self-subsisting Self (of my

²⁹⁹ Such a ‘falling away’ will include the languages of theology. These always need to be skeptical about any pretensions to ‘objectivity’. A *kenotic* commitment will not elevate ontological claims to the point of reification. A question might arise: as my personal experience becomes more ‘impersonal’, and my way of relating to the other/Other becomes less self-conscious, how much will I still recognize difference? Will I reach the place (or the space) where neither party to the relation becomes a subject or an object?

appropriation, here, from Indian philosophy) is not an acquisition.³⁰⁰ Julian might perhaps consider that *nothing has actually altered*. Or, to appropriate Blake's phrase, something has cleansed the doors of perception, from within. A degree of contradiction is probably accepted by Julian, even as a sense of unicity is conveyed. She manages the non-dual puzzle by balancing the ultimate or absolute with the conventional or relative. Eckhart, for his part, argues that nothing capable of being 'known' can hold absolute existence. Traherne and Julian do not philosophize to the same extent, but they convey their vivid sense of oneness with the divine. They do this with theopoetic emphasis on the particularity and preciousness of each 'thing'. Although there is a future destiny, they are more concerned that each person should (re)enter union with the divine *now and here*. Distinctions will be transcended; at the same time, each person will retain a particular wholeness, a singular selfhood.³⁰¹

Does Julian's feminine iconography amount to a change in ways of thinking and writing about the divine? Does she modify the traditional boundaries of expression? Does she advocate 'a feminine God', outside patriarchal tradition? She does not; nor it is it reasonable to take a modern discourse and project it onto medieval England. But Julian does aim at a theopoetic expression of the dominant paradigm. The divine becomes feminized for her, but only feminized within the hierarchical frame. She does not challenge the paradigm; or rather, her challenge is within the tradition itself and represents her discovery of the tradition's subtle poetic.

³⁰⁰ In traditional *Vedāntin* and *Advaitin* usage, the Self (capital 'S') is sometimes a synonym for God and sometimes not. (It is never a synonym for the modern, so-called empirical self, small 's'.) The Self (capital 'S') is not something to be discovered or journeyed towards. In one of the main senses of its usage, it is *what we are* beneath the veil of ignorance. In real-life *Advaitin* usage there is no place for a capital 'S' for the Self, since there is no ontologically contrasting small 's' self.

³⁰¹ Cf. Catherine Keller's observation: 'We move through particular relations to particular things to glimpse the unseen interrelatedness of all things – and always back to the particular.' Quotation from: Keller, C., *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1986, p.158.

Her emphasis has been construed as non-dual. Nonetheless, her blend of passion and equanimity ensures a tone of devotional love for the God who is both Subject-ively and Object-ively the One. Today, this would imply the defeat of unconstrained individual autonomy by a passionate surrender to love's constraining communion and community. Included here is the probable surrender of certain beliefs (such as 'hell' in Julian's case?) and the surrender of any doctrinal system which demands ruthless defense.

To speak of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian in one breath is obviously to court a charge of historical carnage; they cannot critically be situated together. In these first three chapters I have chosen to collapse time somewhat and to re-member them as connected presences within the holy communion which overflows time. They share a passion to 're-insert' their readers into Spirit. At the same time, they are not oblivious to the reality that knowledge comes through embodiment, 'personhood' develops through relationship, and community is established through open communion.

An understanding of *agape* as creative, *kenotic* love is relevant here, since *agape* is love which is informed by the worth of humans. It is also informed by the worth of non-human animals; indeed, of all creation. The purpose of *agape* is to create and to extend networks of open and just relations on Earth. It cannot properly do its work until we are *informed* as to the worth of creatures. The information having been received, an actional manifestation (beyond intention and sentiment) will tend to follow. The action will enrich the life of the creature who is loved.

In other words, the Christian tradition is clear that *agape* must add to the affirmation of a creature's worth.³⁰²

And so the passion of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian is to take us back to that from which they assume we came. Their idea of 'the spirit' does not connote the modern sense of soulfulness, which might imply a particular embodiment of a particular person: 'you' or 'me'. Nor is 'the spiritual' to be confused with the psychological, as it came to be expressed in the centuries after the Enlightenment. They regard the capital-s Spirit as ineffable and infinite. It transcends the traits of personality. It moves in and through the cosmos; indeed, around and within each one of us. My three writers seem to assume that we are, as it were, mini-spirits. We are embodied for a time; we enjoy real, *embodied* affinity with ultimate Spirit. By 'we' they wish to include all people, at all times and places. But the friable, contingent reality of enfleshment is not elided by these writers; they are neither misanthropic nor docetic. They are grateful to have bodies in which to appreciate other bodies, *qua* bodies. For example, Traherne is most attractive to me when he departs from his use of abstract qualities and brings a tighter exuberance to bear.

To fly abroad like activ Bees,
Among the Hedges and the Trees,
To cull the Dew that lies
On evry Blade,
From evry Blossom; til we lade
Our *Minds*, as they their *Thighs*.³⁰³

³⁰² Cf. Charles Taylor's phrase 'a divine affirmation of the human' which helped my orientation here. See: *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989, p.521.

³⁰³ Quotation from: *Walking* (Margoliouth, vol.2, *op.cit.*, p.135f.; italics in the original)

I do not wish to infer that Julian, Eckhart and Traherne share an identical idea of embodiment. Nor should internally consistency be assumed. A statement to the effect ‘Each is comfortable with the body’ is simplistic; it would be apposite to say that their voices are polyphonic. Eckhart, in particular, is polyphonous. Neither writer necessarily aims at a coherent Christian manifesto. Their non-dual tendency implies a relational world; the experiences to which they bear witness are those which tend towards the interconnection of all things. If a paradigm could be located in their work, it would be a paradigm of *perichoresis*. As stated earlier, this signals the defeat of the paradigm of domination.

But my trio are not early Whiteheadians or nascent process theologians. And their emphasis on the interconnection of all things does not lead to their desertion (for example) of the church’s sacramental ministry. Since, on their understanding, God’s transcendence has taken embodiment, the divine is figured as fully participating within humanity’s ‘concrete immediacy’. Julian shares the interest of Eckhart and Traherne in the transformation of humanity, through *kenotic* and *perichoretic* enactment. Where the patriarchal model might tend to become a paradigm of domination and subordination, these writers would tend to undercut it by emphasizing affinity and intimacy.

In view of the elapse of centuries, we remain largely ignorant of their levels of epistemic sophistication. People today are less likely to accept the idea of unmediated experiences of divine presence. And yet, postmodern humanity is not necessarily prepared to reject all forms

of ‘presence’. When someone asserts an awareness of ‘presence’, we might feel (with Derrida³⁰⁴ and others) that they are reporting a mere ‘trace’ of presence. In other words, we feel that no being, whether an earwig or a rhododendron, can ever be *fully* present to us. Be that as it may, an unmediated experience of God is generally regarded today as unbelievable. Rather, we tend to accept that *whatever* the nature of our experience, it cannot be regarded as fully separate from our social structures and conditionings.

In the broadest of senses, Julian and Eckhart anticipate Traherne’s overt non-dual tone. At a stretch, Traherne might be imagined as anticipating the irreducible plurality of truth. If his non-dualism is nominated as ‘experiential’ and the non-dualism of Julian and Eckhart is configured as ‘more conceptual’, this might be convenient but not helpful. Christian non-dual discourse does not lend itself to close definition or neat category. From its beginnings, the Christian tradition is aware of being enveloped by Mystery, both cosmic and immanent. On the other hand, the non-dualisms of the ‘East’ require detailed elocution.³⁰⁵ As to Julian, it would be wrong to label her as a non-dualist, *simpliciter*. In the cause of connected or relational theology, she *partially collapses* the classic Western dualisms of creator/created, spirit/matter and subject/object. She does not attempt to clearly state the *origin* of her non-dual tone or the *type* of non-dualism which attracts her.

The non-dual tone of my three writers is based (see the Introduction) on the non-dual approach of Jesus himself. They are very conscious that their spiritual commitment hinges on the

³⁰⁴ The next chapter includes ‘a poet’s version’ of an aspect of Derrida’s work.

³⁰⁵ This is not to imply that *Advaita Vedānta*, for example, is devoid of mystery. The next two chapters will allude to the *Advaitin* declaration of the Self (capital ‘S’) within the self (little ‘s’). If we *are* the *Ātmā* (the Self, capital ‘S’) we are of course inseparable from the ultimate mystery. But note that *Advaita* cannot recognize a little ‘s’ as against a capital ‘S’.

primary teaching of Jesus: ‘God is Love’. It seems likely that they view the Trinity as the most profound (and yet most ‘simple’?) poem of theology. This is because the manifestation of ‘God is Love’ requires a threesome: a Lover, a Beloved, and the love that passes between them. Julian, Eckhart and Traherne understood themselves to be participating in divine creative action. In a literal way, they seem to have experienced the purport of Acts 17:28: the divine is that in which we ‘... live and move and have our being’.³⁰⁶

Is Paul saying, in the Acts passage, that we are grounded in *Being* itself? If he is, there might be Christian warrant for characterizing the divine, not as a being, but as the act of Being itself. In addition, is Paul implying that we are inextricably linked to the transpersonal energy of *Consciousness*? If so, there might be warrant for characterizing the divine as the ground of Consciousness. It should be clear that I am pursuing a recognizable Pauline resonance between *Brahman* (as ground of being) and the *Ātmā* (or the Self, capital ‘S’) as ground of consciousness. The interest, here, is in locating a possible line of concurrence, while at the same time accepting the metaphysical incompatibility of Christianity with Hinduism.

³⁰⁶ NRSV

Chapter Four: Dropping and Finding the Self

Separate chapters on Traherne, Eckhart and Julian have alluded to a certain consonance, with the inference that, within themselves, each writer sees the purport of *Tat tvam asi*.³⁰⁷ With no knowledge of *Vedānta*, as far as we know, each writer expresses the implications of the central *Vedāntin* assertion. This might partly be explained by their familiarity with the great disclosure: ‘I Am That I Am’ (Ex. 3:14, considered in chapter two).

To express the *Vedāntin* assertion in personal terms, if I was ever able to ‘Realize’ something of the ‘I Am That I Am’³⁰⁸, the consequences would parallel the implications of *Tat tvam asi*. That is to say, I am not the person who (in the absence of awareness) I believe myself to be. I am not the person who develops into the ‘me’ of my conception. My dualistic outlook is fallacious. Beyond all names (or mental phenomena) and forms (or physical phenomena) I am one with ...with ...? An authentic answer to that question, on my understanding, cannot be reached outside the *śūnyatā* or the *kenosis* (already discussed) that constitutes a vision of reality that is non-dual and is both ‘empty’ and ‘full’.

It is now appropriate to discuss Ramana Maharshi (d.1950) perhaps the best-known modern exponent of ‘Eastern’ non-duality. I regard the *Advaita Vedānta* of Ramana as compelling, within its own terms. But the significance of Ramana for the present study is the analogical value of a comparison with Traherne, Eckhart and Julian. As already intimated, all four tend to

³⁰⁷ *That thou art!* (literal Skt.). My preference might be: *You are That!*

³⁰⁸ A caveat regarding this rendering of the Hebrew was mentioned in chapter two.

raise questions about the reliability of our ordinary perceptions of reality. But Ramana reinvigorates his tradition of classical *Vedānta* and collapses the assumed objective world into boundlessness or ultimate formlessness.

Influence of Ramana Maharshi

Ramana's pluralist outlook and sense of presence was an indirect influence on the Hindu-Christian ashrams which now exist in India. Well-known personalities include Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux, d.1973) and Bede Griffiths (d.1993). An influence on my poetry, Ramana put forward two movements as indispensable to spiritual life. The first movement takes us away from over-identification with our bodies, our thoughts, and our feelings. Ideally, this first movement is accompanied by a second movement; namely, an experiential recognition (Realization) of our true nature. This original but concealed nature is more connected to infinite Awareness (and to a sense of the presence of this) than to the body or mind or senses. The traditional question of spiritual enquiry (*Who am I?*) or any serious questioning of our normal assumptions, is well known to reduce our over-identification with bodiliness.

I am putting the case for consonance between Ramana's radical non-dualism and the more moderate non-dual heritage of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian. Ramana maintains that I will learn, through stillness, to accept myself as a deeper being than my ego permits. He speaks of silence as the wordless communion behind all thought and action. Indeed, he speaks of Silence

as my true nature, through which the One Source discloses itself by grace. Ramana's emphasis on 'self-enquiry' is intended to lead to the (direct, immediate) Realization that my true life is not separable from 'limitless Awareness' itself. Ramana regards the *I Am* (of Exodus 3:14) as another way of characterizing the ultimate Silence. The *I Am*, the Silence, the Self, the Pure Consciousness and the limitless Awareness are treated as synonymous terms.³⁰⁹ Regarding the dying and rising motif which is so basic to Christianity, Ramana can say:

Real rebirth is dying from the ego into the spirit.
This is the significance of the crucifixion of Jesus.
Whenever identification with the body exists,
a body is always available, whether this or any other one,
till the body-sense disappears by merging into the source:
the spirit, or Self. The stone which is projected upwards
remains in constant motion till it returns to its source, the earth,
and rests. Headache continues to give trouble,
till the pre-headache state is regained.³¹⁰

The tendency here is toward the recovery of a pre-existing condition. There is no hackneyed talk of the spiritual 'journey'. Traherne, Eckhart and Julian would tend to agree. Indeed, the idea of a spiritual 'path' holds a self-defeating element. It reflects a dualistic habit of mind and a future-orientation that counts against authentic life. Among spiritual writers, Traherne, Eckhart and Julian are united in focusing on life as it is lived 'now'. Would they favour the word 'Awakening' as applied to the present moment? We cannot know; but I wish to note the

³⁰⁹ The Self (the *Ātmā*) or innermost principle of humanity has been briefly discussed in relation to Eckhart's 'true nature' (see chapter two). Within the Upanishadic traditions, the Self is often (but not always) equated with *Brahman* and with the Absolute. Further reference will be made (in the present chapter and in the next) to the Self in relation to *Advaita Vedānta*. It should be said that Ramana's *Advaita* has no scope for capitalizing the word Self; there is no contrasting or small 's' self.

³¹⁰ Cited in ed. Godman, D., *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Penguin/Arkana, London, 1985, p.196.

obvious: a ‘spiritual’ concern with one’s ‘journey’ implies a yet-to-be-reached future. This is anti-Hindu, and arguably anti-Christian. The poem below alludes to this point.

Walking in Tamil Nadu

Near the ashram gate, palm trees flow with the wind;
red hibiscus remain open. A large bird sculls across the sky;
the holy mountain burns with archaic value.
Our notion of time dissolves
for just a moment, as in a dream we greet the ancestors
and think the eternal present unremarkable.
We watch the rain, tactile rain,
in demure light. Someone lowers the word *spiritual*
onto the Kaveri River. We watch it drift away
into nothing, into everything. Drenched by hidden sweetness,
we cling less tightly to thought. A large bird dips, floats,
alights next to us. It peers up: *I am here. I am here.*
Beyond arrival, beyond non-arrival, we are already home.
Each thorn, sharp seed, hibiscus: always harshness
at the heart of life, always openness.

Someone suggested that I write a poem for the wedding of a relative. Eventually published as *Pilgrimage*, it drew no cogent responses from the recipients; therefore I re-worked the poem as *Walking in Tamil Nadu*, above. Sages such as Ramana tend to keep silent for this reason: they know that pivotal spiritual experiences are non-transferable; no-one can do ‘spiritual work’ on behalf of another. It is recorded that people with open-hearted trust were made whole through

touching the hem of Jesus' garment. But we accept that 'transferred wholeness' cannot persist; the recipients are not generally so 'whole' that they manifest the way of liberation for others.

Śaṅkarā argues against the false distinctions which he sees arising from 'divided time'. In developing non-dualism as a branch of *Vedānta*, Śaṅkarā is responding to what he regards as the Buddha's denial of a genuinely transcendental metaphysics. Alluding to Śaṅkarā's thought, Ramana writes that it cannot accurately be said that we have a goal of knowing spiritual 'truth'. This is because 'the truth' in *Vedānta* is already the ground of all knowing. Knowledge has priority over any desire for spiritual experience, no matter how 'truthful'. But non-dualism is vulnerable to generalized statements and *Advaita Vedānta* remains vulnerable on the question of the inherent value of individual persons. People with a concern for classical logic might ask: what happens to my particularity? If that which is 'individual' is somehow dissolved, just *who is it* that is going to treat me with compassion? And *vice versa*. Ramana was asked: 'If the Realized and the unrealized alike perceive the world, what is the difference between them?' Ramana replied:

When the Realized Man sees the world
he sees the Self that is the substratum of all that is seen.
Whether the unrealized man sees the world or not,
he is ignorant of his true being, the Self.
Take the example of a film on a cinema screen.
What is there in front of you before the film begins?
Only the screen. On that screen you see the entire show,
and to all appearances the pictures are real. But go and try
to take hold of them and what do you take hold of? ...
So it is with the Self. That alone exists; the pictures come and go.

If you hold onto the Self, you will not be deceived
by the appearance of the pictures.³¹¹

Another analogy, which Traherne would have appreciated, runs as follows: ‘The divine is like the sun. I am like the sun’s reflection on a vast, changing sea. Therefore I am an illusory sun. My reality, my authentic Self, comes from the sun itself.’

The vulnerability to which I have alluded might reflect my own conditioned concern to protect individuality. Values which might be integral to any ‘impersonal’ approach to ‘salvation’ can seem offensive if we remain attached to concepts such as inherency and to assumptions regarding separable ‘personalities’. From a ‘Western’ and Kantian perspective, the system of *Vedānta* can lead to illusionism. It can also be used as a rationale for social determinism. We are aware of the historic hegemony of the Brahmin caste; conservative *Vedāntin* ideas have, from time to time, lent legitimacy to potential abuses of power.

Although there is a confluence of diction between aspects of the *Advaita Vedānta* of Ramana and Traherne, Eckhart and Julian, it would be disingenuous to argue for compatibility. Not only do their presuppositions differ, but the multifaceted nature of their implied positions warns against generalized remarks. We might nonetheless feel the contiguities. A confluence of diction centres on ‘the way of interiority’ (Eckhart). The conceptual, and even the *sensible*, tends to disappear. What is retained is purportedly pure experience, whether of the *Ātmā* (the eternal Self) or of Emptiness or of Spirit. In Christian terms, ‘the way of interiority’ is the

³¹¹ Cited in ed. Osborne, A., *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*, Rider/Century Hutchinson, London, 1987, p.192.

entrance, more and more deeply, into ineffable mystery of Spirit. It is an experience, beyond traditional dualistic thought, of a unified field of presence. Subject and object are said to be inseparable (and not merely inter-related). In Buddhistic terms, especially in the Mādhyamika school, there is said to be a realization of being-as-emptiness. Being is said to be empty because it cannot be understood in terms of any reference point beyond itself.³¹² For Traherne, Eckhart and Julian, however, salvation is God's action to draw the world back from nothingness into fullness. It is the drawing back from the negative formlessness of nothingness, and a recovery of present-time fullness. The 'way in' to salvation is within: it is within the deepest centre of one's being³¹³ and yet is not separate from active compassion. Laurence Freeman, a Benedictine who leads a community of meditators, states that compassion is the result of mindfulness.

It limits the sway of evil in the world, and it can undo negative karma
- as Jesus 'took away the sins of the world' not by judging the world,
but by loving it with the compassion of his mindfulness.

... Evil is not so much the wilful concentration of our energies on a
deliberate wrong. It is rather the tragic foreshortening of consciousness
to the key hole of the ego, through which we can only peep into reality.³¹⁴

³¹² Cf. A description by Jack Kornfield: 'Emptiness refers to the underlying non-separation of life and the fertile ground of energy that gives rise to all forms of life. Our world and sense of self is a play of patterns. Any identity we can grasp is transient, tentative.' *A Path with Heart*, Bantam, NY, 1993, p.200.

³¹³ Cf. Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) who writes: 'As long as I distinguish the *within* from myself who seeks the within, I am not within. He who seeks and that which is sought vanish in the last stage, and there is nothing left but pure light, undivided, self-luminous.' Quotation from: *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (Panikkar, R., ed.) ISPCK, Delhi, 1998, p.146. For the latter decades of his life, and Abhishiktananda was both *Advaitin* and Christian. He managed this tension by emphasizing that our experience of the divine is 'meant' to transcend doctrinal or conceptual incompatibilities. Parts of the present study attempt to express my agreement with this perspective. There are obvious problems. The aim of the *Advaitin* is to move beyond personal identity and to be immersed in the pure Consciousness or the Infinite One. This involves the transcendence of *namarupa* (the world of *names* or mental phenomena and *forms* or physical phenomena). A Christian might rightly feel defensive, here, about the status of the phenomenal world and about the Western privileging of objective theological claims over against the transient nature of our experiences.

³¹⁴ Freeman, L., *Common Ground: Letters to a World Community of Meditators*, Continuum, NY, 1999, p.35f.

As mentioned in chapter one, it is unwise to draw firm comparisons between *Advaita Vedānta* and traditional Christian teaching. There is a degree of consonance; there are concurrences of thought and experience. Wolfgang Smith is salutary, by way of reference to the non-dualism of Jacob Boehme (d.1624). Smith writes that ‘... one must remember that there are different kinds of non-dualism, and that even in *Vedānta*, the *advaita* of Śaṅkarā represents but one school, one ‘point of view’ if you will’.³¹⁵ A Christian non-dualist, Smith believes that an easy dismissal of non-dualism as monistic is uninformed. He is clear that ‘... for the Christian, the non-dual or *advaitic* state is realized in the Incarnate Son of God’.³¹⁶ Alluding to the unitive emphasis in both *Vedānta* and Buddhism, Smith can say:

Our union is with the Incarnate Son of God, *and through him*, with God the Father. Now, in this union the creature does not disappear – does not, like the dewdrop, ‘slip into the shining sea’ – but rather becomes assimilated to the Mystical Body of Christ.³¹⁷

Smith here implies that union with God does not entail the cessation of diversity. He quotes Nicholas of Cusa, as follows: ‘In God, identity *is* diversity.’ He locates a non-dual statement by Clement of Alexandria: ‘... the Son is neither simply one thing, nor many things as parts, but one thing as all things, whence also he is all things’.³¹⁸ All people can potentially realize their

³¹⁵ Smith, W., *Christian Gnosis: from St. Paul to Meister Eckhart*, Sophia Perennis, San Rafael, CA, 2008, p.147. For a helpful explanation of the unsatisfactory consequences of translating ‘*advaita*’ as ‘non-duality’ then proceeding to regard non-duality in an abstract manner, cut loose from experience, see Raimon Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being*, Orbis Books, NY, pp.216-224.

³¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.145.

³¹⁷ *ibid.*

³¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.183.

‘oneness with God’.³¹⁹ This is not the same as literally being transformed into God. Early in this study, I mentioned that (on my reading) Traherne’s notion of the divine is that of ‘interconnecting Spirit’. This Spirit is not separate from me; we are not two. But neither are we one (numerically). For Smith, then, we approach a reasonable formulation of *how* we can realize our oneness with God when we accept the kind of language that Eckhart and others employed. That is, realization is accomplished by an activation of the divine Word or Image in our souls. In chapter two, I referred to this activity of the divine and adumbrated the Eckhartian *Gelâzenheit*, the letting-be of detachment or releasement. I see Eckhart’s indubitably non-dual position as a precursor to Julian’s less-figured non-dualism and to Traherne’s return to thorough-going non-dualism.

Charles Taylor and the demise of Western Christian non-duality

It is obvious that a church imbued with a paradigm of domination and subordination takes issue with Eckhartian thought. As a patriarchy arrogating a presumption of ‘speaking for God’, such a church also takes issue with aspects of Traherne and Julian. Within their texts, all three writers find it challenging to pick and choose between what might be *of God* and what might be *of humanity*. On my readings, they venture a sub-text, and sometimes an explicit text, of the non-duality of being. There is a degree of concurrence. They do not regard the Ultimate or the One as ‘another’ in the sense of absolutely ‘other’.³²⁰ Taken as a whole, the passages quoted in

³¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.218.

this study amount to careful declarations of mystical union. But the language of ‘the One’ and of ‘Oneness’ is fraught: it is forever vulnerable to misuse, not to mention over-simplification. Although I see consonance (and although Ramana’s perspective is fundamental to my poetry) it cannot be assumed that ‘the One’ means the same thing across the traditions.³²¹

One Fruit

Come outside
to my apricot tree,
where galahs have left
but one fruit.

Let me have pleasure
in your pleasure
in its taste.

You have watched bees load their legs
with rosemary pollen;
you have seen spinebills
eat the bees.

³²⁰ And they regard their neighbours as neither ‘other’ nor ‘the same’.

³²¹ In classical Hinduism, for example, the One is generally held to be indefinable and ‘attributeless’. It is not necessarily to be conflated with any theistic expression. But, whatever the gradings of conceptual thought, it is regrettable that in both *Vedāntin* and Christian life, the experience of *I Am* quickly became subsumed by moralism, ritual and abstract formulae. Intuition and spontaneity, it seems, are doomed to be taken over by *namarupa* (‘name and form’). The signs and symbols, and their elaborations, were intended merely as pointers to that which is beyond name and form. In effect, Eckhart and to a lesser extent Traherne and Julian, aspired to peel away the onion of truth (*satyam*) to which ‘name and form’ point.

Sensory impressions,
fragments of information,
deductions which might feed
an intuition.

To be alive,
to be here this moment.
Loved in the nearness;
drawn to an otherness.

Poetry is not about delivering messages; nonetheless, excellent writing which happens to carry a message can find wide acceptance.³²² The poem above derives from mutual pleasuring; it is meant to hint at my disquiet with ‘individualism’. Does contemporary society push people in the direction of excessive individualism? Does it do so under the lure of self-fulfilment? If this is true, one of the consequences might be that values which transcend the individual will be shut out.

No commentator has, in my view, chronicled the ‘Western’ demise of ‘spiritual non-duality’ more persuasively than Charles Taylor³²³. Taylor traces the emergence of a self-identifying ‘self’ it to the Enlightenment. The gradual breakdown of social hierarchies and the rise of a sense of egalitarian dignity were two main factors. An ideal of inner authenticity arose, so that gradually a personal identification which was socially-derived came to be considered as feudal. Taylor argues that the authentic self does not fully emerge from one’s inner depths, but is

³²² I am thinking, for example, of novels and essays by Marilynne Robinson (b.1943).

³²³ See *Sources of the Self*, footnoted earlier.

‘coaxed out’ by other people who are felt to be significant. Self-knowledge, therefore, depends upon the dialogical recognition of others with whom one shares language and hence understandings.³²⁴

Taylor implies that the greater the dialogical recognition, the greater the individual’s transformation. A person’s self-images become more positive; they implicitly invoke the truer self as a regulative ideal.³²⁵ When earlier indefiniteness or lack of authenticity is transcended, communion can be experienced. In a later book Taylor laments that ‘the culture of authenticity’ has sunk from a defensible ideal to the level of an axiom. Few people, he states, can now bring themselves to argue the case for moral positions which might support authenticity.

By this I mean the view that moral positions are not in any way grounded in reason or in the nature of things but are ultimately just adopted by each of us because we find ourselves drawn to them. On this view, reason can’t adjudicate moral disputes.³²⁶

Reason has trouble in adjudicating disputes because of the predominance of moral subjectivism, which Taylor rejects. He continues as follows.

The general force of subjectivism in our philosophical world and the power of neutral liberalism intensify the sense that these issues can’t and shouldn’t be talked about. And then on top of it all, social science seems to be telling us that to understand such phenomena as the contemporary culture of authenticity,

³²⁴ *ibid.*, p.31f.

³²⁵ *ibid.*, p.43.

³²⁶ Taylor, C., *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991, p.17.

we shouldn't have recourse in our explanations to such things as moral ideals but should see it all in terms of, say, recent changes in the mode of production, or new patterns of youth consumption, or the security of affluence.³²⁷

A self-described Christian humanist, Taylor holds that 'spirit' is an irreducible component of human nature. We define ourselves in terms of a vision of what is pre-eminent to us. Ontologically, such self-definition is unavoidable: we need to articulate that which moves us. This is especially true in relation to the values by which we aspire to live. These will constitute our ultimate 'goods', our pre-eminent vision. Layers of modern assumptions might need to be worked through, in order for us to bring these 'goods' to full consciousness. Taylor notes that 'feeling' ought to be defended as inherent to the spiritual component of humanity. 'Feeling' has irreducible epistemological value. It is closely linked to our views on the nature of reality; it is integral to what we regard as all-important. Unusually, Taylor links a sense of 'who we are' with the process of becoming 'oriented in moral space'.³²⁸ He rejects naturalistic accounts of moral development. Instead, he holds the view that we are *necessarily* oriented with *some sort* of moral framework. We acquire 'languages of moral and spiritual discernment',³²⁹ by means of which we are empowered to discern between our experiences and to make distinctions which constitute acts of understanding. Taylor uses the words 'epistemic gain',³³⁰ to describe our movement, from diverse backgrounds and feelings and intuitions, towards

³²⁷ *ibid.*, p.21.

³²⁸ *Sources of the Self, op.cit.*, p.28.

³²⁹ *ibid.*, p.35.

³³⁰ *ibid.*, p.72.

varied patterns of ‘qualitative discriminations’.³³¹ We move towards new ways of seeing, which become the acts of understanding whereby we arrive at a sense of who we are.

In the Gospel stories, however, something beyond Taylor’s ‘epistemic gain’ is being taught. The disciple who goes out to ‘find’ her true self will find only *that which she already is*. Jesus has a direct interest in lived experience and in finding the right words to depict the underlying meanings of experience. He is not represented as being overly concerned with general abstractions. The theological construction of his parables tends to reveal an absorption with actual *perichoretic* situations, with what William James called ‘primary realities’, and not with doctrines. Hence the reported emphasis in the Gospels on discovering that which we already *are*. Appropriating from India the language of ‘the Self’, it might be said that transcendence of the false or delusory self results in the eternal Self’s disclosure.³³² But I need to be careful, in the pursuit of parallels or congruencies, not to elide words and concepts. Different religious languages are involved. And not only languages *per se*. We are also dealing with attempts to give names to aspects of reality which are ‘different’. In view of this, John B. Cobb proposes ‘complementary pluralism’. His premise is that ‘... the totality of what is, is very complex, far exceeding all that we can ever hope to know or think’.³³³ Cobb suggests that complementary pluralism might adopt three kinds of ‘ultimates’. These are, first, the ‘formless’ or ‘acosmic’,

³³¹ *ibid.*, p.77.

³³² But although the eternal Self has a share in transcendence, it is not necessarily (within its own tradition) equated with ‘the All and the One’. Nor is this Self always equated with pure consciousness, although perhaps it might be regarded as ‘root-consciousness’, of which consciousness is a reflection. Can it be said that Eckhart’s ‘our true nature’ precisely parallels the Self of the Upanishads? There are different conceptual systems here; even so, in both systems the ‘primordial true nature’ (in Hinduism, the *Ātmā* or the Self) becomes evident when a person develops (or reverts to) a transmuted consciousness.

³³³ Cobb, J.B., *Transforming Christianity and the World*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1999, p.135. (I might add, at this point, that pluralism is sometimes erroneously confused with the effeteness of cultural or moral relativism.)

such as Eckhart's 'Godhead beyond God' and *Advaita Vedānta*. Second, the theistic or 'formed', such as Yahweh and Christ. Third, the 'cosmic', such as primal religions and so-called 'Native' traditions.³³⁴ This proposal from Cobb seems to provide a circumspect means of honouring the irreducible plurality of the voices of truth.

Simone Weil and attentiveness

Weil³³⁵ is indebted to Eckhart in her frequent allusions to self-emptying. Her autobiographical *Waiting for God* carries expressions that could be those of Eckhart himself.

God permitted the existence of things distinct from himself
By this creative act he negated himself, as Christ has told us to negate
ourselves. God negated himself for our sakes in order to give us
the possibility of negating ourselves for him. This response, this echo, ...
is in our power to refuse.³³⁶

Weil wrote very little about the oppression of women under particular 'interpretations' of the tradition of self-negation. She is more conducive to our sensibilities when she discusses 'attention', as in attention-giving. This she found in Kierkegaard (d.1855). It is worth quoting him; I have retained his own emphases:

³³⁴ *ibid.*, p.74.

³³⁵ Simone Weil (d. 1943, aged 34) features in section two of the poem *Transgressive Saints*; see chapter three, above.

³³⁶ 1973 [1951] p.145.

The immediate person thinks and imagines that when he prays,
the important thing, the thing he must concentrate upon,
is that *God should hear what he is praying for*. And yet in the true,
eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer
is achieved not when God hears what is prayed for,
but when *the person praying* continues to pray until
he is *the one who hears*, who hears what God wills.
The immediate person, therefore, uses many words
and therefore makes demands in his prayer;
the true man of prayer only *attends*.³³⁷

Weil follows Kierkegaard in her view that attention-giving is a pre-condition of the *kenotic* lifestyle. She would have preferred that people who are interested in prayer should drop the name *homo sapiens* and re-name themselves *homo orans*, meaning the people who *attend*, or pray or focus. Attentiveness without an object is regarded as prayer in its supreme form. Through a choice to focus on the other/Other, the seemingly separate individual transcends the illusion that her ego is dualistic. She will realize experientially that the duality of ‘there is me’ and ‘there are other objects’ is an illusion borne of post-Enlightenment reifications of the individual ego.

In the section "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies" in *Waiting for God* Weil writes:

Attention consists of suspending our thought Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually

³³⁷ *Journals* [1958] p.97.

looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.³³⁸

It could be said that ‘attention’ for Weil is an experience of ‘openness to the openness’. To state this less opaquely, ‘attention’ is a refusal to fasten one’s focus upon any particular phenomenon. It involves a withdrawal of a desire for any particular thing. Such openness is unconditional, in the Gadamerian sense of allowing the ‘text’ to which I attend to disclose itself. Nonetheless, openness will inevitably include my pre-judgments, which I will question as I reach fresh interpretations, fresh horizons and fusions of horizons.³³⁹ In the presence of another’s ‘text’, my mind and senses might grasp something of the external details of the other. But, in Gadamer’s view, my spirit (*Geist*) can go further and enter something of the totality of the person (who is otherwise ‘other’). This other person can then be seen as ‘whole’ rather than as a collection of separate attributes. In other words, one person can enter into the subject-being of another, and maybe vice versa. One sees that the other *is*, in a sense, one’s own self. The world has dramatically ceased to be broken up into ‘we’s’ and ‘they’s’. Further into *Waiting for God*, Weil can write:

To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it,

³³⁸ *op.cit.*, p.111f.

³³⁹ As to the art of theology, Gadamer implies that no sensible theologizing can exclude multi-dimensional conversations and such experiences as might lead to the re-writing of one’s pre-conceived positions. This is not to say that personal experience is an adequate basis for either theology or spirituality. As to the plastic arts, and to poetry, Gadamer says that they serve far more than a symbolic role. Their playful and festive character can transport the participant (the reader of a poem, for example) out of ordinary time into ‘fulfilled’ time. In reaching fresh understandings (via a poem, say) we bring our pre-judgments with us. But we need to acknowledge that the tradition or traditions within which we ‘sit’ have generated our prejudices, and that these do not always distort our understandings. In his philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer represents a break from subjectivism. As I understand him, he holds that art, for instance, is *not* merely a matter of taste. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum, NY, 1989: 2nd revised edition; this edition 2004.

not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul,
that means to awaken to what is real and eternal,
to see the true light and hear the true silence.
A transformation then takes place
at the very roots of our sensibility...³⁴⁰

We need to be aware, she writes, that the fragmentary is the bearer of infinity.²⁵² God essentially is unknowable, but God in *fragments* may be known. This is because the fragments are not ‘out there’ but ‘in here.’ The Real that is accessible is found within our fragmentary selves. It is simply ‘in here’ all the time, and not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered. There is, for example, an important teacher-to-disciple question within the *Vedāntin* tradition. It is, of course: what is Reality? The ‘answer’ which the disciple might eventually evince (and hopefully incarnate) is along these lines: when the mind declines to assume or to generate falsity, *there is Reality*. But the ‘absorption’ of a person by (or into) Reality might not be for everyone! In such a connection as this, Weil insists that the acceptance of contradiction and incompatibility is preferable to any fantasy of (artificial) unity.

It is notable that Rowan Williams is respectful of Weil, and yet critical of her chosen life of ‘abandonment’. In a book of essays (2007) Williams (as I interpret him) criticizes her tendency to over-determine the divide between God and humanity. That is, she exaggerates the *kenotic* imperative which any human being devoted to justice and truth must face up to. Weil safeguards God’s absolute otherness (and our surrender to this) by downplaying a biblical assumption that in reaching out in love to the created world, we also move nearer to God. We

³⁴⁰ *op cit.*, p.159.

²⁵² *The Need for Roots*, 1978 [1952] p.120-1.

know that Weil claimed to be attempting to model her life on that of Christ. But did she overstretch the teaching on self-emptying? I have mentioned the subordination of women, under a discriminatory *kenotic* doctrine. And we might remember that Weil, in effect, starved herself to death. I surmise that Weil was aware of arrogance, a sense of superiority, in her own character. In order to counter this, she chose an ascetic lifestyle and over-stretched her theory and practice of self-abnegation.

The idea that attention-giving involves the withdrawal of desire for any particular thing is basic to the Christian contemplative tradition, as well as to older traditions. Writing within the Christian tradition, Cynthia Bourgeault states that the purpose of prayer is not to ‘access’ God. Rather, it is to ‘... align spontaneously with Jesus’s own continuously creative and enfolding presence through emulating his *kenotic* practice in all life situations.’ Noting that ego-driven spiritual ambition ‘can wind up in very bad places’, Bourgeault says ‘... it is important never to lose sight of the fact that *spiritual ambitiousness and attention of the heart are mutually exclusive categories*. The proud may fall, but it will not be through following the Way of the Heart, for the heart has its inbuilt safeguard: it perceives only in the modality of surrender.’³⁴¹

As to the *kenotic* surrender of Jesus, he appears to have grown to accept that living by a full attention to truth and justice would result in great wrong being done to him. The Gospel of John at first presents a particularly exalted view of Jesus. But it gradually emerges that John wants the reader to move beyond regarding Jesus as an exalted being, merely. Within the text

³⁴¹ Bourgeault, C., ‘*Centering Prayer and Attention of the Heart*’, Crosscurrents 59:1, March 2009, p.25f, emphasis hers.

itself, this truth-loving healer is depicted as moving to the view that he is going to suffer appallingly. Perhaps the author wants his readers to refrain from over-indulging in various consolations. Jesus had given them a new confidence. But, at the same time, they (also) are destined to suffer.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat
falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (Jn 12:24, NRSV)

Here then is a picture of *kenotic* life: I am invited to indulge in less projection of myself, in order to allow more space and time for ‘the other’. This will involve receiving, within my consciousness, the gift of ‘...the mind of Christ’ (1 Cor. 2:16 REB). This is not likely to sit well with Buddhism, since it is wary of the concept and languages of transcendence. But there is a Buddhist tradition which takes genuine transcendence seriously, namely, Shin Buddhism, the Japanese ‘Pure Land’ expression of the Mahāyāna. Shin includes, as an axiom of enlightenment, that an authentic gift of grace is necessary.³⁴² The relevant Japanese word is *tariki*, the power of Another. Might not there be some accordance, here, with Paul’s view that the small-s (or phenomenal) self lacks the motivation to be transformed?³⁴³ Of relevance here is Jn 15: the invitation by Jesus that I should come to terms with my own reality. In the first part of Jn 15:4 there are two closely-balanced clauses: ‘Abide in me as I abide in you’ (NRSV). In his commentary, C.K. Barrett (not regarded as radical) considers these clauses to be saying:

³⁴² But of course the Shin gift of grace, and the response of trust, needs to be understood as occurring within a different cosmological context than (for example) a Christian one.

³⁴³ Some Buddhists have difficulty accepting that Christianity construes itself as a religion of transformative experience, and not primarily as a religion of faith in something handed down from elsewhere. In my experience, Christians generally construe themselves as discoverers of that which is *really* real, not on someone else’s say-so, but within lived experience. Such an inner epiphany is taken to imply transformation, generally speaking, into the capacity to love all other beings.

‘Let there be mutual indwelling.’³⁴⁴ Commenting on the overall theme of John 15, Barrett states: ‘There is a mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and disciple.’³⁴⁵ This disciple finds herself dramatically reconciled with ‘all reality’. That is to say, she is indwelt by the Source, the Ultimate. The stillness of Jesus’ inner being is offered throughout the NT as exemplary. In his stillness lies a potential revelation of the unity of body and spirit and of genuine *gnosis* (Gk: experiential knowledge). The revelation, on this view, is the experience of knowing who one really is. Only then is the disciple ready to engage in unselfconscious self-emptying. The little self has found its place, that is to say, it *has no* ultimate place. It no longer feels threatened by the imaginary total otherness of God or by the delusory total otherness of others.

In the Christian *kenotic* story there are dialectical terms: *spirit* empties itself in order to become *body*; conversely, *body* empties itself in order to become *spirit*. In traditional language, the Father empties himself in creation and humanity empties itself of divine intimacy as a result of the Fall. In due time, Jesus empties himself in love and is declared to be the Christ. Finally, the Holy Spirit empties itself across all humanity, indeed, across all creation. This Spirit potentially ignites individual and collective actions which are said to be those of Jesus extended more widely. Such actions are characterized by love manifesting as surrender; they are *kenotic*. They are also oriented toward the furtherance of community.

³⁴⁴ Barrett, 1978, p.474.

³⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.473.

Andrei Rublev and Buddhist ‘emptiness’

In the Introduction, I proposed Rublev’s *The Holy Trinity* as an exemplary illustration of *perichoresis*. Rublev represents the divine as a movement between three figures, seated as part of an open circle. Gone is the Church’s patriarchal notion of unity at the expense of community. Gone is the hierarchical Church’s tacit sequence of control: first the Father, then the Son, then the Spirit. Rublev’s icon is concerned with the flow of love, the circulation of energy within a table setting of equality. The icon, when observed deeply, conveys a strong sense of intimacy. *The Holy Trinity* is quintessentially Byzantine, but painted in Russia. Rublev consciously by-passes any possibility of ‘three gods’. He also avoids monism and dualism. A monk within the Byzantine rite of the Russian Orthodox Church, Rublev’s integrity of insight was recognized by his contemporaries. He depicts a single divinity with three differentiated aspects. The Father, Son and Spirit (or rather, the three angels of Gen. 18 who are polite stand-ins for the Trinity) are humbly engaged in mutual deferral. There is no power-inclined hierarchy; no stratospheric manipulator of things Earthly. Orthodox understandings favour a double view of *kenosis*. First, God surrenders a degree of divine freedom in creating free humans; second, the life of Jesus liberates human consciousness so that it might be freely, *kenotically* offered back to God.

To make a personal digression, I once considered the idea of a triune God, with an apparent bias toward masculine power, to be damaging as well as unintelligible.³⁴⁶ Observing Rublev’s icon, I see that I over-valued intelligibility. Within a theopoem of three ‘persons’, a degree of knowledge and experience of the divine as *ever-present* might be possible. I try to imagine the

³⁴⁶ I now understand that my reactivity was less against ‘divine love relations’ than against an idealization of power which can perhaps lie, poorly concealed, beneath ‘Christian’ projections of divine omnipotence, *et al.*

divine relating to ‘divine-self’ in love. I can find an openness to the revelation that the divine loves all creatures. Whether or not I am reaching a clearer view, I am no longer surprised at Rublev’s popularity. He occupies a singular place in a form of art which allows for immediate spiritual communication. His vision is *perichoretic*, *kenotic* and non-dual. The heightened emphasis which is given to bodiliness, in all the Orthodox Churches (not only the Russian) means that bodily fulfilment is given a higher value than in much of Catholicism. The *kenotic* process paradoxically evolves, wherever a balanced orientation of bodiliness is upheld, into the emergence of fullness. *Kenosis* (as emptying) becomes *plerôma* (fullness). Vacancy is repeatedly brought to fullness. In the foreground of *The Holy Trinity* is a vacant space. A chair is missing, reserved for me. Will I pull up my chair? Seeing the icon deeply, I see that no unbridgeable gap exists between me and the divine. A form of consummation is proffered.

Donald Mitchell has written a dialogical account of the shape of Buddhist *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and Christian *kenosis*. He states that the creation of a true mode of human life cannot be achieved through reason alone, or by human volition alone, but through spiritual realization in a day to day *kenotic* path. In effect, Mitchell asks: might not *śūnyatā* and *kenosis*, as the heart of Buddhism and Christianity, represent the way to compassion and love? Do not both traditions point to interior freedom or non-attachment as the way to transformation? In a way that is mysterious, Mitchell says, emptiness is simultaneously fullness.³⁴⁷

In the *kenosis* of Christ, God communicates himself. He is not revealing something other than himself. He ‘speaks’ himself in his Word.

³⁴⁷ Mitchell employs a traditional Christian metaphysic and ontology. He has declared himself to be a convert to Christianity from a background in Soto Zen.

And the essence of this message is love: 'For God so loved the world that he sent his only son' (John 3:16). This love of God for the world that is revealed in the *kenosis* of the cross, is also found in the *kenosis* of love at the core of creation...³⁴⁸

There are, therefore, two principal *kenotic* events for a traditional Christian point of view. First, creation; second, redemption. Mitchell refers to the second *kenotic* event as follows:

The power of this redemptive *kenosis* rescues us, it overturns our ordinary mode of being in the world and recovers our original mode of being in the world. In so doing, it recovers our original union with God and unity with others and all creation.³⁴⁹

Mitchell engages with the thought of Keiji Nishitani (d.1990) and his predecessor in the Kyoto zenist tradition, Kitaro Nishida (d.1945). He hints that Eckhartian 'nothingness'³⁵⁰ or 'mystical Void' might have commonalities with Buddhist emptiness, provided that we face a real disparity: the Christian non-dual vision (Mitchell believes) cannot be all-inclusive. There remains a divine transcendence. Discussing Nishida and Nishitani, he writes:

They see a dynamic identity between Absolute Nothingness and the forms of creation. The *kenosis* of Emptiness, seen from the near side by Buddhists, is an emptying out of Emptiness as the fullness of the world in an absolute sense that leaves nothing transcendent from this world. ...
To use Nishitani's terms, the near side is the far side, *samsāra* is Nirvāna,

³⁴⁸ Mitchell, D.W., *Spirituality and Emptiness: the Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*, Paulist Press, NY, 1991, p.65.

³⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.71

³⁵⁰ Eckhartian 'nothingness' (*niht* or *nihil*) has differing applications, as between God and God's creatures, as mentioned in chapter two of the present study.

Emptiness is forms and forms are Emptiness. In this way,
Emptiness experienced in Buddhism moves one back to the world of forms
to find it anew as a fullness of wondrous being.³⁵¹

In this quotation, *samsāra* would seem to hold its primary meaning as the Earth-bound cycle of reincarnation. Although Buddhism, in general, resists speaking of a true self (and distances itself from Hinduism in this regard) Mitchell uses the words ‘true self’ when writing of the parallels between *śūnyatā* and *kenosis*. As implied above, he notes that neither are achievements of the will. They are, instead, the lived-out expressions of ‘... negation of the ego-self’.³⁵² He goes on to state that wherever there is ‘awakening’, there is ‘... a realization of lived compassion, of the compassion of Emptiness lived in the realizer’. Mitchell reiterates a wisdom-saying attributed to the Buddha: ‘Who sees the Dharma, he sees me. Who sees me, he sees the Dharma’. He then isolates a major difference between Buddhism and Christianity.

In Buddhism, one can become a Buddha in the realization of Emptiness.
But in Christianity, one cannot say that one becomes a Christ
in the realization of the redemption. Rather, this Christian realization
is a participation in Christ’s redemptive *kenosis*.³⁵³

The customary translation of *śūnyatā* as ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’ is unfortunate if emptiness becomes equated with misapprehensions of ‘nothingness’. Is it helpful, in popular ‘Christian-Buddhism’ to equate the divine with ‘Absolute Nothingness’? Perhaps *śūnyatā* is better translated as ‘openness’, although not in the sense of receptivity to anything whatsoever. I consider that the concept of ‘openness’ helpfully reflects the open-ended nature of reality

³⁵¹ *op.cit.*, p.23 & 24.

³⁵² *ibid.*, p.58.

³⁵³ *ibid.*, p.59.

itself. It might be understood as the context in which ‘experience’ is experienced, with spiritual discernment and discrimination. But, is ‘openness’ a state which one can consciously enter? Maybe not. It would seem more likely that ‘openness’ is that which is always present, but requires recognition. The broad injunction, within the *Vedāntin* teaching on the Self, is that we should grow beyond our tendency to *obscure* the original ‘openness’ of our true nature.

Beverly Lanzetta might offer clarification on Eckhartian nothingness.³⁵⁴ She maintains that implicit in Eckhart is a metaphysical nothingness which ‘... cannot rest at any final and definitive revelation of God’. Lanzetta continues:

The very mystery of the twofold *kenosis* intrinsic to Christian thought always points *beyond itself*, never resting on a final identity. Therefore, the true ‘end’ of the soul is not Trinitarian, Christocentric, or necessarily tradition-centred, but the nothingness that is ‘neither this nor that’.³⁵⁵

Approaching the end of her essay, Lanzetta avers that Eckhart’s position at this point is complementary to that of Buddhism.³⁵⁶ That is to say, she finds in Eckhart ‘... a movement from emptiness ... to form ... and from form back to emptiness centred in the inner life of divinity’.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ In Lanzetta, B.J., ‘Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart’, *The Journal of Religion* 72:2 (April 1992), Chicago, ILL, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 248-268. (Apropos the Martha/Mary story in Lk 10 this article is also footnoted in chapter two of the present study.)

³⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.263 (sic).

³⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.267.

³⁵⁷ In Lanzetta’s reading of Eckhart the trope of not resting in purported finalities has resonance with my current interpretation of theological propositions. Do they not culminate in new questions; are they not therefore capable of being viewed as modes of transcendence? Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer: ‘All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. ... *The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things* and is always in part so defined. ... It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition. ... And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies

Traditions of self-negation, as illegitimate interpretations of either *śūnyatā* (emptiness) or *kenosis* (self-emptying) have proved manipulative, especially of women. As a legitimate (and today, ecologically imperative) ascetic practice, the *kenotic* lifestyle put forward by Jesus was one the reasons for his desertion by his closest friends. Johannes Baptist Metz mentions this in a pointedly modest booklet which hints that the Vatican itself is indifferent towards *kenosis*.

Poverty of spirit is always betrayed most by those who are closest to it.
It is the disciples of Christ in the Church who criticize and subvert it
most savagely. Perhaps this is why Jesus related the parable
of the wheat grain. Finding in it a lesson for himself,
he passed it on to his Church, so that it might be remembered
down through the ages, especially when the poverty
intrinsic to human existence became repugnant.³⁵⁸

This booklet by Metz became popular, despite its theme of Jesus-as-empty and its exhortation that humanity must discover its identity through embracing emptiness. Metz continues:

It is no accident that poverty of spirit is the first
of the beatitudes. What is the sorrow of those who mourn,
the suffering of the persecuted, the self-forgetfulness of the merciful,
or the humanity of the peacemakers - what are these if not variations
of spiritual poverty? This spirit is also the mother of the three-fold
mystery of faith, hope and charity. It is the doorway
through which we must pass to become authentic human beings.

tradition its power.' Quotations from: *Truth and Method*, Continuum, NY, 1989: 2nd revised edition; this edition 2004, p.271ff. (italics in the original).

³⁵⁸ Metz, J.B., *Poverty of Spirit*, Paulist Press, NY, 1998, p.43.

Only through poverty of spirit do we draw near to God;
only through it does God draw near to us.³⁵⁹

Metz concludes that an enlightened understanding of love is contingent upon would-be lovers accepting their inner calling to ‘hand over’.

Every stirring of genuine *love* makes us poor. It dominates the whole human person, makes absolute claims upon us (cf. Mt 22:37), and thus subverts all extra-human assurances of security. The true lover must be unprotected and give of himself or herself without reservation ...³⁶⁰

Did thinking such as this prompt the statement, attributed to Jesus, that I must enter the Kingdom through the needle’s eye? If a tiny aperture is meant, this would require an amusing shrinkage, if I am to pass through it. I would need to be markedly *reduced*. This seems to me to be the *kenotic* thrust of Phil. 2: the form of God is characterized as undergoing shrinkage. Paul states that Christ emptied himself (*eauton ekenôse*), taking the form of a servant (*morphên doulou*). But emptiness or *kenosis* becomes manifested as fullness: ‘... in him all the fullness (*plêrôma*) was pleased to dwell’ (Col. 1:19). In sum, Christ is represented as the self-emptying form of God; upon emptying himself, he reflects divine plenitude (*plerôma*) so that humanity might become ‘... sharers in the divine nature (*theias koinônoi phuseôs*)’ (2 Peter 1:4).

Let the same mind be in you
that was in Christ Jesus,

³⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p.21.

³⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.43.

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
(Phil. 2: 5-11, NRSV)

This passage is widely regarded as an early hymn, embedded decades later in what is regarded as Paul's final extant letter. Whatever its origin, Paul conveys the idea that in *kenosis* we can discern an act of divine self-communication. The following paraphrase of the passage by Sebastian Moore has merit.

Jesus, being in the form of God (as all humans are)
did not translate this into being for himself (as all humans do).
On the contrary, he took our humanness on
in an extraordinary way, its true way,

a way of total self-dispossession, of freedom from ego
in which (upsetting all our ideas of what befits divinity)
he made manifest the ultimate mystery
that itself is poor, for-all, has no possessions,
makes rank meaningless ...³⁶¹

The centrepiece of the *kerygma* is the un-Platonic and anti-Gnostic understanding that humanity is not required to ascend to union with the divine; rather, the divine descends to humanity. Unhappily, as the *kerygma* solidified into dogma, *kenosis* came to be used as part of an ideology of oppression. But *kenosis* should not be thought of as self-denial, in the sense of withholding from the self its necessary needs and desires. Paul (and Jesus³⁶²) are not pursuing a doctrinal position; the language of dying to self is within a discourse of freedom; the language is a strategy, on the way to freedom.

As to the whole of Phil. 2, a degree of prejudice against some aspects of Pauline teaching might mitigate against a grasp of the radical nature of his embodied, interpersonal and *transpersonal* ethics. As to Jesus himself, his *nothingness* (from ambiguous origins to near-total rejection as an adult) becomes symbolized by the offensive cross of execution. But as the Buddha's emptiness opened the occasion for his enlightenment, the *kenosis* of Jesus opened the occasion for 'the kingdom'. This is the realm of true children, the unencumbered, the trusting. It is only the children, the ones who become 'as children', who inherit the spiritual effulgence of the divine 'parent'. Adults are invited to die, not only to their self-importance, but to their limitations generally, including a personal sense of exclusiveness, or of separateness from

³⁶¹Moore, S., *Jesus the Liberator of Desire*, Crossroad, NY, 1989, p.42.

³⁶² Cf. Statements of a *kenotic* nature attributed to Jesus, such as Lk. 14:26-27 and Mt. 16:24.

others. But the invitation to die in this sense (the ‘true *kenosis*’?) is also an invitation to rise into a life of new communion and renewed community.

Various *kenotic* solutions have been put forward to address the question of how the divine can unite with the human. One appealing avenue of resolution might be to assert that God needs humanity, even though we, and our world, remain contingent. Perhaps God cannot choose to deny God’s own character of love. If the expression of this love involves the risk of rejection, the assertion is made that God is genuinely *kenotic*. Whilst God’s character is consistent, God is not necessarily unchangeable.

In the absence of any detailed treatment of *kenosis* put forward by Traherne, Eckhart, or Julian, I will make use of a text by French philosopher Stanislas Breton (d.2005). In an exposition of Phil. 2, Breton writes that ‘... the final intention of this sublime theatre, by emphasizing a will to love that would renounce all possession, signifies the need to transcend the conceptual schemas of an ontology that has heavily strained the historical representations of faith.’ Breton continues:

This moving image of sacrifice and emptying unfolds schematically
to make us aware of the emergence of a sovereign freedom,
whose ecstasy of giving requires as preamble the rejection
of every richness, of substance or attributes.³⁶³

That which is divine becomes a slave. In the form of the man Jesus, the slave is ‘... dispersed in the unconditional service of those whom he has come to serve’.³⁶⁴ The very being of this

³⁶³ Breton, S., *The Word and the Cross*, Fordham University Press, N.Y., 2002, p.90.

slave ‘... consists precisely in not being’.³⁶⁵ At the close of the pericope, the actions of self-emptying are reconfigured as holding sublime consequences. But the actions have been performed by the slave without condition. He does not have a sublime reward in mind; the service rendered is service and not calculation in the degraded religious sense of pie-in-sky.

The Son of Man retains the form of the slave only to render it
insupportable and to make the condition of an incomparable joy
surge in the forgetfulness of self: that which raises to the dignity
of selfhood the disinherited of every kind, who must be able to say:
I am what I am. *Agape* is inseparable from this liberating service,
which makes of nothingness not only something but someone.³⁶⁶

The already existing hymn, which Paul invokes, certainly gives us a story of disruption. Jesus disrupts the ‘normal’ world and its worldly assumptions and expectations, not least those of the ‘worldly religious’ who might have gained from the stratification of society. To use the language of anachronism, both Right and Left are set to be discombobulated. Both the under-privileged and the over-lords of Philippi are enticed to a position of faith. Or rather, it is Paul’s hope that faith is evoked, on all sides, by the radical metaphor of reversal. The Ultimate One, with the onto-theological accoutrements that antiquity had bequeathed to Philippi, is radicalized. There is a funnelling down, into suffering and into death. And then, the *kerygma* of a new way of being, a new life is offered within everydayness and within an imagined future. But the future is deemed, already, to have begun. It is an *experienced* future, in the sense of a

³⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.94.

³⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.96.

³⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.99.

felt knowledge which is *already* felt. Its basis is the unconditional love of the divine-become-human. Just as Jesus at his baptism is represented as hearing God's voice: 'You are my beloved one; in you, I take great delight', so too, each follower of Jesus is intended to hear an *identical* affirmation. As with Jesus, they are interpenetrated or interpermeated with the Spirit, so that they can bear witness: 'Not I live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20). I briefly mentioned, in chapter two, the trans-identification of this passage.

The disciples of Jesus are represented as reluctant to accept, from the lips of Jesus, that he is about to be divested of life itself. *Kenosis* is not humanity's natural ambiance; the disciples are within the process, along with their developing tradition, of thinking of 'messianism' in terms of power politics and restoration. Their assumptions are antithetical to the developing *kerygma*. Unambiguous arguments and assured foundations, worshipped by religious lovers of certitude, are always likely to trump fresh ideas, such as *kenosis*. On another tack, is it possible to see *kenosis* as a precursor to *perichoretic* expressions of mutual indwelling? As a way of speaking about possible differentiation within the divine, does *kenosis* indicate relationality? Does the passage, Phil. 2: 5-11, foreground humanity's incorporation, by the divine, within divine modes of energy and participation in the ever-on-going creation?³⁶⁷ But to articulate *kenosis* as a basic standpoint for Christianity³⁶⁸ is arguably to accept a weakening of the metaphysical foundations of 'Christendom'. It is to follow the implications of *kenoticism* by questioning

³⁶⁷ *Kenosis* does not relate only to the divine movement towards humanity. Those who follow Christ will adopt *kenotic* attitudes; a range of NT passages relating to the service of Christ enjoin his servants to divest themselves, as per Eckhart's releasement (see chapter two). Cf. 'Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries' (1 Cor. 4:1 NRSV). Divine *kenosis* is enframed within every encouragement to embody active sharing and compassion. It is understood that it is given to humanity to actualize the divine in concrete ways!

³⁶⁸ As, for example, in the work of Gianni Vattimo, one of whose stated aims is to de-foundationalize Christianity in pursuit of its original impetus of faith and love. As is the case with Thomas Altizer, Vattimo holds that Christianity legitimizes secularisation and the 'end of religion' as understood *cultically* (as well as culturally) hitherto.

anything that resembles essentialism. An outcome of this process could be the following: if the questioning is applied to both philosophy and theology, the two disciplines could again be drawn together.

A fair question is this: how rapidly did large parts of the church degenerate from a *kenotic* community, into a system of mediation, perhaps designed for the reinforcement of ‘certitudes’? A move beyond mediated religion will tend to foreground the non-dual. If it is the Christian religion, then a signal text will be Phil. 2, quoted and discussed above. Less emphasis on mediation will mean more emphasis on *relations*, on the relationships that in any case lie at the centre of existence. Relationships are at the centre of the following poem.

Luminous Bodies

Her old VW
 mows the dirt road
 to my shack,

past the noiseless fall
 of frangipani,
 a flash of butterfly

in deep shade.
 We walk in the garden
 of now,

and find an alcove
of tenderness
behind the melaleuca.

She listens
to the hidden life:
roots drawing nourishment,

sap rising in stems.
Each twig,
an inverse tongue;

each leaf and flower
a wisdom far removed
from knowledgeable din.

Infrangible desire:
a thousand cicadas
throbbing the heat.

Shyly assertive,
she sings my body;
I, hers.

We sing
the joy
of imperfection,

the caress
of impermanence.
Soft tissue,

exquisitely bruised,
collapses
into limb-sized folds.

The attempt is made, in my poem above, to juxtapose that which is fleeting with that which ever-abides as Truth/Wisdom. Desire, which is important to Traherne (see chapter one) is important in the poem. Although desire participates in the conventional truth-level, it highlights the personal or particular form which can manifest the formless. A reviewer has written that my poem can be read ‘... as an expression of the universal need of connection and comfort. It appeals at many levels.’³⁶⁹ Within the Abrahamic traditions, it might be averred that humanity becomes what it *desires* and continues to become what it is *desiring*.³⁷⁰

Derrida and the faith of the ‘mystics’

In previous chapters, I have mentioned Kearney, Caputo, Derrida and Vattimo. Unexpected as it might seem, each one has paid attention to the *kenotic* emphasis of Phil. 2, and perhaps contributed a little to the ‘emptying out’ of perhaps ‘unsustainable’ metaphysics. I am using the

³⁶⁹ David Kelly, writing in the Australian literary journal *Famous Reporter*, number 40, Dec. 2009, pp.158-162.

³⁷⁰ Cf. A statement of longing given to us from the lips of Jesus: ‘With desire I have desired’ (Lk. 22:15).

word ‘metaphysics’ in the ancient sense of an attempt to uncover knowledge of ‘reality’ in and of itself. This was the way in which Traherne and his predecessors regarded metaphysics. Although aware of some of its limits, they can be presumed to have viewed metaphysics as the pinnacle of philosophy. But, to them, there was something more important than metaphysics. They held that faith, in the sense of a trust which manifests as love, was the necessary means of recognizing that to which metaphysics referred. As to Derridean ³⁷¹ tropes, I can offer only a poet’s point of view. Derrida seems to reassess the Gospel’s *kenotic* theme; faith seems privileged ahead of reason; faith is figured as reason’s reason. This is what I make of the Derridean ‘faith as meaningful *event*’. An authentic person is viewed as someone who faces up to faith’s *kenotic* nature. That is, faith is always subject to a deconstructionist reconfiguration; it arguably lacks substantive content. There is nothing about the content of faith which can be separated out and ‘known’. But Derrida nonetheless maintains that faith is a meaningful event. The ‘meaningful’ part is *the necessary doubt* which is inseparable from authentic faith. While presuppositions of metaphysics are unacceptable (at least if these purport to claim that descriptions of God can be fully intelligible) the meaningfulness of faith is broadened out, within the vital unknowingness of uncertainty.

Derrida’s interest in *kenosis* and *perichoresis* appears to stem from his admiration for Eckhart. This, despite (or because of) the fact that Derrida attempts a theology without an assured object. Such a way of doing theology retains the possibility of the subject, God, as actually *being the subject*, and not the object of human projection. I remain uncertain as to following Derrida in his rejection of the metaphysics of divine presence. Did Derrida, like Eckhart, desire

³⁷¹ I wish to emphasize that my comments regarding Derrida are tentative glosses, relevant because Derrida argues that apparent dualities are ‘conditions of possibility’.

to be faithful to the kind of vision that attempts to adopt God's perspective? To the extent that such might be achievable,³⁷² it could transpire that postmodern 'excess' is liberational in its intent. It might also be a joy-filled safeguard for particularity. In my next poem there is an emphasis on particular forms as background to the manifestation of the formless.

The Animal Within

Exhausted
by Frenchmans Cap,
I ease my body
between buttongrass clumps
onto moorland dampness.

My breath
grows steadier.
One thought
spawns another
with less alacrity.
The animal within
tastes silence
beyond thought,
stillness
beyond form.

Cubed droppings
on softly abrasive
astelia alpina.
Tiny sundews' amber
stickiness.

I sense earth's joys,
more piquant
for their transience.
I ease myself down
onto moorland
dampness.

³⁷² That is to say, without the reification which might approach a form of totalitarian thinking.

The ‘silence beyond thought’ (above) is more aspirational than real; it is the hope of embodying the inner silence of an authentic, qualified non-dualism. Derrida, in order to lessen the duality of us/them, advises an on-going commitment to see or to feel one’s way into the ‘other side’ of any apparent dualism. A community which respects diversity (and is therefore non-violent?) will acknowledge the inescapable presence of ‘the others’ as part of its self-definition. Here Derrida approaches Christian teaching on *perichoresis*. The three persons in Rublev’s *The Holy Trinity* maintain a separateness. And yet they defer to each other; they cede their separateness and ‘interpenetrate’. They are held to share one nature, after all. Rublev is Russian Orthodox by both birth and conviction; he believes that God is One. My point here is this: Derrida seemingly believes that humanity needs to learn the practice of seeing ‘the other in oneself and oneself in the other’. Such practice is both meditative and *perichoretic*.³⁷³ Derrida holds that the meaning of ‘God’, of the Holy Name, must translate into the practice of love without remainder. The kingdom of God is therefore a *when*, and not a *where*. As with faith, so with the divine: God is not so much an entity as an event. Derrida writes of traces, rather than signs, because he considers that ‘a trace’ might point less ambiguously beyond itself. A sign, on the other hand, might merely convey a largely imaginary memory of pure presence.

³⁷³ In my view, twentieth century literary theorists tended to embrace Derrida somewhat uncritically. On the other hand, biblical scholars initially trivialized his originality and significance, and indeed, trivialized the potential value of his ‘post-religion spirituality’. Or so it seemed to me. But Derrida was reminding them, in French baroque profusion, that their faith did not consist in the correspondence between propositions and things, and also, that it never had. There had never been such a ‘thing’ as ‘objective knowledge’. There was only ever the response of faith to Christ’s *kerygma*. This *kerygma* was not a peculiar selection of metaphysical statements but a declaration that the future of humanity depended on activating the commandment of love, in Derrida’s case the post-metaphysical truth of love. But it remains love; love in its only true sense of *practicing* love. Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard (and Dostoyevsky) here. On this view, other forms within ‘Christendom’ tend to be sub-Christian. If they do not feature a community of people who are practicing the truth of love, they are anti-Christian.

Derrida's name might be allied, not only with Eckhart, but with Nāgārjuna (d. ca. 250CE) the Indian founder of Mādhyamika Buddhism. Confuting a contemporary Buddhist concern to establish precise meanings for words, Nāgārjuna pointed to the priority of developing a certain kind of awareness; hence his Middle Way (Mādhyamika). It became basic to the development of Māhayāna Buddhism. Within the Māhayāna, the central concern is not an understanding of what *śūnyatā* (emptiness) might *be*, or how it might *function* within Buddhism. Rather, the central concern is with an emptiness that is actualized or realized. Only in realized emptiness can the full interdependence of the metaphysical dimension and the ethical dimension be found. That is, realized emptiness is not separate or separable from the cultivation and actualization of compassion. As with the Māhayāna, so with non-dual Christianity: there is an articulation of distinctions which must then be brought together, existentially. As implied throughout this study, Traherne's attractiveness hinges on the way he brings together relations between the divine and the human, the theological and the existential, the Word as written and the Word as lived experience.³⁷⁴

Derrida draws attention to the unstable nature of conceptual meanings; unstable because so language-dependent. He re-mints *śūnyatā*, from the thought of Nāgārjuna, to advocate a need for perpetual openness inasmuch as conceptual meanings are never settled; texts and contexts share in the general condition of flux. If we look for a consistently stable essentialist 'core', we have trouble locating it. It is a commonplace that many Christians have historically clung to fixed ideas about substance and identity. Similarly, many Buddhists have perhaps reified

³⁷⁴ The Māhayāna has been far more stringent than Christianity in pointing to the irrelevance of abstract notions in the experience of awakening to one's true self. If I desire to move beyond my false, delusory self, how on earth are musings about cause and effect, truth, essence and substance, *when treated abstractly*, going to advance my desire?

śūnyatā. But Derrida might be regarded as lending his ‘undecidability’ to Nāgārjuna’s use of *śūnyatā*. This is because emptiness is a way of expressing the exhaustion of all points of view, of all theories whatsoever. It needs to be remembered that undecidability does not mean that a decision cannot be reached. The ethical choices that we constantly feel obliged to make are necessary decisions. We decide them, as we have to, in the face of undecidability. Those who desire to do so are invited (whether by ‘calling’, by temperament, or by cool decision-making) to throw off the mooring ropes. The call of *śūnyatā* is the call to slip outside the safe, conceptual harbour. The openness of the ocean draws us. It seduces us to a greater level of creative risk.³⁷⁵ In the next poem, I aim ‘to write’ an epiphany of openness. The experience occurs at a rugged locality in Tasmania.

Tasman Peninsula

Climbing a headland which faces a grey swathe
stretching to Antarctica,
I walk the precipice rim
to scan chasm edges,
see a petrel,
bird of husky alto
and straight drop,
dive to a garfish. The petrel’s beak points

³⁷⁵ The aphorism ‘*One goes, and one IS*’ attempts to express the matter. As the vision of the *I Am* (*aham asmi*) is revealed, the sense of a personal self diminishes. In the symbolic world of *Vedānta*, it is said that there is but one infinite Selfhood, one infinite ‘I’. And from an ultimate perspective, the phrase *Tat tvam asi* comes in. As mentioned, it can be translated as ‘You are It!’ but is often rendered as ‘This thou art!’ The relation between ‘I’ and ‘thou’ can be said to be neither dualistic nor monistic. Rather, the ‘thou’ can be said to permit or to allow the ‘I’ and the ‘I’ can be thought of as allowing the ‘thou’. Continual, unobstructed vision is implied; we would cease to indulge opinions or slavishly adhere to concepts. We would not report a vision; the vision would declare itself. The one true ‘I’ would announce itself in the experience of *I Am*.

to nothing except the fish, which in turn
symbolises nothing but itself,
a lesson I resisted,
much as that raptor
resists plummeting to garfish,
an easy talon-catch it wouldn't rise from,
should the ragged up-curvings of its rust wings
prove unequal to a wave's down-curling.
One afternoon, as the heat thrust upward,
I watched the wing-tip touchings of falcons courting,
their aerial spiral
of tip touch,
bank away,
retouch.
Always, an unfixed interplay,
invisible with visible:
turbulence, purple shadow, diverse currents.
I pause to greet momentary things,
nature's ebullient commerce. A stick
transmutes into an insect; in the bay
where we learnt to swim, supported underneath
by arms gently lowering our bodies on the swell,
a fish transmutes into a sponge.
Drawn, almost,
to pass beyond sense, reflective thought,
its structures, definitions,
I loop down to a marsupial lawn.
Casuarinas lean landwards from long habit,
raindrops pearling from their branches.
Small skulls move me,
of themselves,

but signify nothing beyond life, death.
The fly which buzzes over a wombat,
killed on the highway;
an infant wombat, asleep in this pullover,
and the pullover itself;
medicinal oil scent,
thick fur's clamminess;
heave of in-breath
and soft wheeze
of out-breath:
specific material realities,
coherent in their origin and end:
wombat, casuarinas,
petrel, garfish, waves:
not the knowledge
that each belongs to all
and all to each,
but an immediate grasp,
an embrace of wide-armed uselessness,
as when your face strikes a door
left ajar:
experience of the bruising world
and us
immersed in the unnameable
which imbues all praises and laments,
abides in all things,
ever united, ever distinct.
The distant waves dissolve,

re-shape,
dissolve,
barely cover
firmly rooted
lurching kelp.

Judith Beveridge is quoting from this poem when she writes that ‘Charlton’s work makes a plea for experience ... *to pass beyond sense, reflective thought, its structures, definitions* ... into an acceptance of the material world as a place where boundaries can dissolve, to make way for deeper, non-dualistic forms of communion.’ This commentary appears in an unpublished article by Beveridge. It is mentioned in an *Afterword* by Janet Upcher to my second poetry collection *So Much Light*.³⁷⁶ Upcher adds: ‘By exploring momentary things, by pushing boundaries to make way for deeper communion, and through observation of seemingly insignificant creatures and natural phenomena, Charlton integrates the physical and the spiritual and shows that genuine transcendence is possible’.³⁷⁷ But having concluded the poem in question on a rather lofty non-dual note (‘...us / immersed in the unnameable / which imbues all ...’) I am now less certain. I do not readily ‘see’ the Mystery or our immersion in it; I tend to confuse an absolute level of truth with the relative level of experience. I retain a tendency to overlook the Gospel wisdom that ‘lowly things’ are in fact ‘high’.³⁷⁸

Unobstructed vision, metaphorically speaking, has been held for millennia to constitute the most ‘spiritual’ of our senses. In Mt. 6, Jesus is represented as endorsing this received piece of

³⁷⁶ Pardalote Press, Hobart, 2007.

³⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.71f.

³⁷⁸ In every milieu, the question of interpretation will be basic. A follower of Gadamer here, I accept that genuine reflection is hermeneutical and bound to involve constant, imaginative conversation.

wisdom. Derrida perhaps follows Emmanuel Levinas (d.1995) in writing that although the divine is beyond all representation, the divine will nonetheless influence me (even though I might be an atheist). A vision (of God, in this case) must be allowed to declare itself, though it might remain ultimately incomprehensible. To examine this notion of the vision of God (this God who might not exist, in any meaningful sense, but who nonetheless will influence me) Levinas uses ‘illeity’ from the Latin pronoun *ille* (or *illa*), literally ‘that over there’. The God of dubious existence, signalled by illeity, will interrupt me to provide motivation to find the unobstructed vision of *you*. For *you* are the other to whom I bear an ethical responsibility. God, the other beyond all others,³⁷⁹ underwrites my responsibility to you, even if (says Levinas) I am an atheist! God is ‘that over there’ and beyond the possibility of a meaningful conjunction, as between him or her and me. Yet illeity imposes upon me the responsibility to see *you* clearly. This is a theme in Levinas; nuanced, it is also a theme in Gillian Rose (d.1995), whose small book *Love’s Work*³⁸⁰ influenced my writing of the following poem.

To Your Fully Open Eyes

You have emerged from water
for a dot of time.
Your middle name is Pagan
— dweller in nature —
a slight exaggeration, since,
like any urbanite,

³⁷⁹ But ‘otherness’, particularly with reference to the divine, can be emphasized so strongly as to effectively place this ‘other’ beyond all possibility of any relation to *anything*. Hence the desire, from the early Christian centuries onwards, to configure the divine in perichoretic terms. I mentioned, in chapter one, a conception of God as ‘interconnecting Spirit’. Traherne would everywhere seem to approve of such words.

³⁸⁰ Published by Vintage, London, 1997.

you check your hair
and double-check it looks alright.
You are evolution's intuition;
a sliver of light
not bound by clothes
or skin.
You hold exploding stars
and dust which weeps.

Only yesterday, it seems,
you stretched across me —
hands upon hands,
eyes upon eyes,
mouth upon mouth.
Confluent passions,
woven in the fabric of the deep,
will reach a oneness
beyond all purpose.

And so I praise your fully
open eyes,
the way they dwell alongside
your thoughts;
the way they live suspended happily
between hope and
hopelessness, beaming your portion
of time
into infinity's heart.
I praise these eyes which neither cling

nor push away,
but exalt in dappled light,
entertaining no wish
for life to be otherwise,
knowing themselves inseparable
from the evanescent,
like a banksia's fragrance,
briefly held
upon the motion of clean air,
after rain.

In metaphorical and literal terms, seeing the other's face, as it is, creates the prerequisite for dialogue and hence for love. Recognition (to follow Levinas) has priority over cognition.³⁸¹

Sallie McFague writes of the loving eye '... trained in detachment':

This is the eye trained in detachment in order that its attachment
will be objective, based on the reality of the other and not on its own
wishes or fantasies. This is the eye bound to the other as is an apprentice
to a skilled worker, listening to the other as does a foreigner
in a new country. This is the eye that pays attention to the other
so that the connections between knower and known,
like the bond of friendship, will be on the real subject in its real world.³⁸²

McFague had earlier written of the need within Christianity, as practised in the 'West', to return to the non-dual intimations of the original Christian vision. Reminding us that

³⁸¹ However, the Levinasian preoccupation with alterity does not, in my view, take adequate account of the legitimate needs and desires of the self (mine or that of my beloved).

³⁸² McFague, S., *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1997, p.116.

‘enfleshment’ was the radical point of the *kerygma* (declaration; the Gospel announcement) she writes as follows.

Christianity is the religion of the incarnation par excellence.
Its earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment:
from the incarnation (the Word made flesh) and Christology
(Christ was fully human) to the eucharist (this is my body,
this is my blood), the resurrection of the body, and the church
(the body of Christ who is its head).³⁸³

McFague implies that institutional developments resulted in oppositional thinking. This led to the privileging of a de-incarnated idea of ‘spirit’. Clear vision can restore the kerygmatic emphasis on Christianity as ‘... a religion of the body’.³⁸⁴ This is a viewpoint with which Traherne might have agreed. It means, for today, that the story of the incarnation of Christ is not a completed story. It is an on-going narrative. It takes place through you and through me. Through our bodies we fulfil the ethical summary of the First Testament. Micah 6:8 might be paraphrased as follows: ‘What does the divine ask of you? Three things: to enact justice, to show mercy, and to have a right understanding of who you really are.’ This summary is not an implacable statement, delivered from elsewhere, with which I might enrich a foundational onto-theology.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ McFague, S., *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1993, p.14.

³⁸⁴ *ibid.*

³⁸⁵ By onto-theology I mean a representational attempt at ‘writing God’. It is notable how far foundational or metaphysical ways of doing theology have moved beyond an assumed sense of the givenness of reality. Following Kant, we know that we do not understand or perceive empirical objects in a pre-given, realistic way. Whatever we perceive, think, and understand does not arise as a given. It is constructed through our syntactic, semantic and ethnographic backgrounds. We do not so much perceive reality as conceive it: we are knowing subjects. Hence the necessary reappraisal of traditional metaphysics (and ontology). By the same token, I am not suggesting that Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology constitutes an adequate critique of any particular theology, still less of any form of theism.

Shiva and the Spirit's transformative power

Christian experience seems to have been first enunciated in terms of existential understanding or of personal knowledge. On the other hand, it would seem that *Vedāntin* experience was traditionally described in terms of knowledge-with-heightened-self-awareness. Through self-awareness, we receive intimations of the *Ātmā* ('the Self'). On this view, an over-emphasis on mere *knowing* can lead to an unnecessarily wide gap between the one who knows and that which is known. In both *Vedāntin* and Christian thought, that which might be called 'the One' or 'the ultimately Transcendent', chooses immanent manifestation. In the *Vedāntin* system, God has been variously termed *Isa*, or *Isana* or *Isvara*, which each might translate as 'Lord'. In neither *Vedāntin* nor Christianity can 'the One' be described as literally *knowable*. Likewise the state of ultimacy (if it is 'open' to humanity, as sages suggest) cannot be described as *knowable*. This is because the ultimate state would be 'one' with the knower herself/himself. Just as an eye cannot see itself, so too, a human cannot *know the knower*. Ramana is a traditional *Advaitin* when he teaches that the absolute level of truth is formless, eternal and infinite (yet manifesting perpetually in form).

Apology to God

I'm sorry for treating you as disembodied;
I forget that I'm one of your embodiments.

I'm sorry for regarding you as indestructible.
Today I destroyed you
in a person I ignored.

Forgive me for treating you as unborn,
when you are constantly being born.

Excuse these very words.
I forget that you're beyond words.

And excuse me for ever thinking these thoughts.
I forget that you're beyond thought.

In Christian terms, the sculpture of *Shiva Nataraja*, originating in South India, can be appropriated as *kenotic*. In its familiar form it dates from the 10th century onwards. Shiva's dance is the *ananda tandava*, the cosmic dance of bliss, which includes everything that happens in the cosmos, indeed, everything *that is*. The dance takes place within a circle of fire, continuously lit from the hand of Shiva. Change is perpetual, but the surrendered heart may find equanimity within flux, because out of the dance comes the proffered palm of one of Shiva's hands. This is the *abhaya mudra*, the gesture of the raised hand with the outward palm. It conveys the injunction: Do not fear! It says: Fear not, for the *I Am* is with you! The *abhaya* reassures the surrendered heart. It does this within an on-going awareness of one's true identity within universal reality. In another of Shiva's four hands is a *damaru*. It is the little drum which emits the OM, which I choose to interpret as the sound of the ultimate *I Am*. The circle of fire and the sound of OM (throughout the cosmos and within the human heart) are simultaneous events.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁶ Cf. Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) who writes: 'OM is the only *japa* (repetitive prayer) that does not distract. Every other word is *phantasma*, whether it be Christian or Hindu. It settles on a thought, no matter how insubstantial it may be. OM is not something thought. It is 'beheld', breathed with my *prana*, beaten out by my heart, seen in what the eyes see, the ears hear, the body touches, the nostrils smell, etc. OM is the unuttered name of the *āman* and therefore of the *Brahman* who is beyond and before the *aham*.' Quotation from: *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (Panikkar, R., ed.) ISPCK, Delhi, 1998, p.312.

The play of Shiva, his *lila*, takes place both in the cosmos and in the heart. The very name of the surrendered devotee, looking at the sculpture, can be said to be 'Shiva'. It can also be said to be 'Apasmara', the diminutive person upon whom Shiva dances. This small being is the symbol of our spiritual forgetfulness. But the sculpture captures Shiva in the dancing attitude of *ananda tandava*, which frees the devotee from dualism's illusion. She or he finds harmony; finds all things in the Self and the Self in all things (BgG 6:29). From the perspective of conventional truth, there is differentiation. There is joy/suffering; life/death; you/me; the innumerable contexts of contingency. I have suggested that the ceaseless flow of energy might find an analogue in the undecidability of Derrida. The flux is necessarily chronic; yet, from the perspective of ultimate truth, Shiva's dance brings the inner and the outer worlds creatively together.

To reiterate: Shiva supports the little flame which sets everything ablaze. But with another hand, Shiva presents us with the *abhaya*, the open hand bestowing peace with the assurance: 'Don't be afraid!' Another hand holds the *damaru*, the small hourglass-shaped drum. With two fingers, Shiva taps the primordial sound, the self-begotten, self-existent sound of OM. Shiva destroys forms and remakes forms.³⁸⁷ In the dynamic interplay of opposites, no being or thing or process is absolutely destroyed or preserved. Rather, all things are transformed.

In Tamil Nadu there is a rugged hill called Arunachala. For thousands of years, Arunachala has been felt to be a holy place. In particular, it is regarded as an unusual, landform manifestation of Shiva, the honouring of which can grace the devotee with increased spiritual freedom.

³⁸⁷ There is death (cruciform-like?) and rebirth (resurrection-like?)

Climbing Arunachala

This mountain is more than an altar
on which to offer the ecstasy
and exhaustion of the world.
Even if all creation were pinioned here,
Arunachala would be more than an altar.

This mountain is more than a sanctuary
in which to feel the intimations
of pure awareness. Even if fire burst
from every cave, Arunachala would be more
than a sanctuary. For this could be the site

beyond all sites. These reddish rocks
could be the source from which we come
and will return. Each glinting stone
is manifesting mystery. If I but see,
my thoughts will sink into a heart set free.

Shiva's activity can be said to be *kenotic*; he is broken down, broken up. He empties out, into all 'individuals'. Shiva is at the apex of paradox, or at the still point of the inferno. Although he might be absolutely characterized as Other, in the empirical world he is not 'other' to anyone or to anything. He can be characterized as *I Am*. In the form of *Nataraja* he not only manifests eternal energy but bestows personal grace on the devotee. Shiva bursts out in all directions; he is not 'just Oneness' but can be discerned in all events and all entities. He is non-dual in

relation to all people, all things. Formless, he bears all forms, holding or manifesting all forms.³⁸⁸

Although there are contiguities between *Shiva Nataraja* and the cosmic and personal claims of Christianity, there is no evidence that sub-continental traditions influenced Traherne or the others. To them, the consciousness of Jesus is paramount. The follower of Jesus grows into the consciousness of Jesus by grappling in the ordinary world with what is false and what is true. In situations of ethical choice, the disciple does not ask: ‘What would Jesus do?’ Instead she or he asks: ‘What should *I* do, within my true humanity?’ True human consciousness can turn out to be divine consciousness, since Jesus brings the divine within the ambience of all.

It is obvious that both classical *Advaita Vedānta* and the Hebraic tradition included viewpoints which set the scene for later perspectives. The relevance of the former, for this reflection, is the thoroughly non-dual emphasis which emerged in *Advaita Vedānta*. As stated, Christianity includes a tradition of non-dualism which has been ignored, if not opposed. Eckhart’s writings were more non-dualistic than officialdom could accept. The non-dual emphasis of Julian and Traherne was not attacked but ignored. But in view of the incompatibility of *Vedāntin* and Christian metaphysics, neither Eckhart nor Julian nor Traherne can be seen as Christian *Advaitins*.

³⁸⁸ Within the symbolic structures of both Shaivism and Christianity, my primary ignorance is held to be my tendency to identify myself with my body, or with my mind, or with my emotions. But Shiva’s fire, regarded as the fire of my own true Self, will burn up the false self, destroying the sense of separation and the false identifications. (The foregoing sentence is cast in terms of conventional truth. *Vedānta* deals with absolute truth; it does not allude to a ‘false self’.) I will thereby awaken to the *I Am*. The knowingness of the *I Am* (of my appropriation, within lived experience) is held to be the core of consciousness.

The thorniest aspect of *Advaita Vedānta*, from the perspective of traditional Christian teaching, is the declaration that humanity and the Infinite share identity. There is but one indivisible Reality; all else is a construction of some kind. But the question remains open as to the *form* of identity which is shared by divinity and humanity. The Infinite, by definition, cannot exclude the finite, so that a basic identity of some kind is allowable to Christians. But the most dogmatic form of *Advaita Vedānta* asserts more than identity; it declares that individual personhood is dissolved within the Infinite. Affinities with *Advaita* are clear when Eckhart attempts to write from God's perspective. But *Advaitins* attempt to conduct their lives from the perspective of the Self or limitless Awareness (or, in some usages, 'God'). Nothing, from such a viewpoint, effectively exists outside the Self. Yet we know that the Self is not necessarily equated with God. Hence it is vital, in any debate about *Advaita Vedānta* and Christianity, to acknowledge differing perspectives and the probable incompatibility of key terms.

Although Traherne, Eckhart and Julian make no claim that humanity is divine, they allow a remarkably 'Eastern' participation within the divine. This relies upon the progressive departure of the separate, calculating, egoic self. We need not assume that 'supernatural' intervention is required, if by 'supernatural' we mean a power which is 'unearthly' yet interventionist. Rather, the transformation of the egoic self lies within the natural framework of life.³⁸⁹ It is a transformation of perspective. Within ordinary activities, 'the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God' (Ro. 8:16, KJV). The point is this: it is not our own

³⁸⁹ This might qualify as akin to Vattimo's 'weak theology', aligned with processive and panentheistic ways of configuring the divine, as against 'strong theology' with its metaphysically-assured pronouncements (in pursuit of furthering established authority?). The poem *Tasman Peninsula*, quoted earlier, might be a clearer example of 'weak theology'.

spirit which ‘beareth witness’. It is the Spirit of the One who is Inexpressible. In the following extract from a poem, I call the Spirit the All-Encompasser.

You have lost the all-embracing song
which nurtures the past
into the future. You have failed
to see the All-Encompasser:
One who inhabits the wind,
without being it; One who dwells
within the cutting grass, but isn’t botanical.³⁹⁰

Perichoresis means the participatory communication of the three ‘persons’ who in Christian tradition are imagined as comprising the source of all. To the three writers of my focus, such a notion of inter-permeation does not countermand divine transcendence, which ‘takes place’ within life rather than beyond it (and includes activities of wholeness and compassion). Participatory communication implies not only compassion towards individuals, but a practical recognition of the interdependence that exists between humanity and social institutions. The tonal register is one of participation all-ways: the Spirit might be the matrix of all that *is*, but there is no on-going incarnational creation in the absence of humanity’s input.³⁹¹

A review by Kerry Leves³⁹² of my book *So Much Light* surprised me by its reference to Ramana. Leves intuited that my poems of moderate non-dualism are influenced and

³⁹⁰ Another instance of ‘weak theology’? The extract is from *Truganini’s Soliloquy* in my collection *So Much Light* (2007) p.48f.

³⁹¹ It can scarcely be over-emphasized that Eckhart, Julian and Traherne are ‘mystics’ *and* activists. Their advocacy of ‘the inner life’ should not be construed as passive. Although ‘mystical’ they are known to have lived active, outwardly engaged lives.

interpellated by the teachings of the sage³⁹³ of Arunachala, although Ramana is not mentioned in either of my books. As outlined earlier in this chapter, Ramana taught that preoccupation with the ‘me’ is overcome through surrender. A state of ‘wakeful sleep’ (*jagrat-sushupti*) is available and desirable; it is a condition of full awareness combined with mental stillness. To place this teaching in a contextual framework, a prior teaching of Ramana’s has to do with ultimate truth, as opposed to relative or conventional truth. From the ultimate perspective, there is only one Reality. It is the *Ātmā*, the ultimate ground of humanity, the eternal Self.³⁹⁴ The classically Western dualism of subject and object is ultimately, on this view, unacceptable. From the viewpoint of absolute truth, both the observer and the object of observation are insubstantial. Further, the very idea that I might be the separate observer of thoroughly external objects is a phenomenon which arises with the beginning of the ‘I-thought’. This ‘I-thought’ emerges from the Self (since the Self is held to be the singular Reality) as long as the Self remains unrealized. The ‘I-thought’ promptly identifies itself with *the body* and tends to view the world as made up of *separate bodies*.

Ramana taught, therefore, the reduction of boundaries. To him, the world of discrete individuals was a dream world. His emphasis on non-separation led to the following poem.

³⁹² In the literary quarterly *Overland*, no. 194, Autumn 2009, p. 90f. Other reviewers who have touched on my poetry’s non-dual aspect include Geoff Page (in *Australian Book Review*, May 2002, p. 37f., and on ABC Radio National’s ‘*The Book Show*’ 26 March 2008); Philip Harvey (in *Eureka Street*, July-August 2002, p.50f.); Anuraag Sharma (in *Famous Reporter* no. 28, Dec. 2003, pp.115-117); Anne Kellas (in *Famous Reporter* no.25, July 2002, pp.190-192); James Norcliffe (in *Island* no.113, Winter 2008, pp.52-54); Sheelagh Wegman (in *Tasmanian Anglican*, April 2008, p.13); David Kelly (in *Famous Reporter* no.40, Dec. 2009, pp.158-162) and Margaret Bradstock (in *Five Bells* 15:1, Summer 2007-08, pp. 58-60). In similar vein, Janet Upcher mentions non-dualism in her *Afterword* to my collection *So Much Light* (2007). In a cover-blurb, Amanda Lohrey describes my earlier book *Luminous Bodies* (2001) as follows: ‘Charlton’s poems are poems-of-spirit and poems of a clearly seen material world: a ‘true’ materialism which grows out of a non-dualistic vision’.

³⁹³ Combining something of both Christian and Hindu understandings, I would regard a sage as someone who has realized Oneness with the Spirit of Life that is the Self of all.

³⁹⁴ Hence Ramana’s tradition understands the Self-experience as devoid of both ‘I’ and ‘mine’. It is the one existence-consciousness (*Sat-Chit*); it may or may not be identified with *Brahman*; existentially, it is held to be a True Seeing, devoid of illusion and delusion. Since self-enquiry is attentiveness to non-dual consciousness, it has no use for a contrasting capital ‘S’.

Languid Day, Heat and Haze

We loll near a headland, meld clammy scents, as couples do
when no rankles surface, none loom, and the moment
finds a mindfulness of flesh.

Wind-thrown trees, all asymmetrical. We climb
to a light-drenched clearing. Frisson of impermanence;
all barriers thin or friable;

no facts to relate, no opinions. Calm passion. Squat banksias
smell like treacle or urine. Thought's endless tape
unravels just a fraction.

An on-going theme of spiritual traditions is that I do not automatically know who or what I am. Kant mightily reinforced the view that I am, *in essence*, quite unknowable to myself. But at the same time, there is a sense in which I *am* known to myself, self-evidentially. Later, psychotherapy of the twentieth century made a de-spiritualized version of the question 'Who am I?' fashionable. A range of therapies sought to recover a sense of authentic existence or personal being, often over-individualized. Cut loose from spiritual traditions, psychotherapy attempted to establish that I am, in fact, a *somebody*. But a much older wisdom would indicate that from the point of view of ultimate truth, I am a *nobody*. All biological, social and otherwise conditioned definitions of who I might *be* are found to be inadequate; worse, they are found to be delusory.

Variations on ‘Who am I?’ (such as ‘Who is it that enquires?’ or ‘To whom is this experience happening?’) share the same purpose: to lead to the Self’s manifestation, in and through the phenomenal self. In other words, we find our way to the *kenotic* wisdom which informs us that our persistent ‘ego sense’, useful in our earlier development, is insubstantial from the perspective of ultimate truth. But the ‘I-thought’ or ego sense is hard to dislodge. The feeling of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ prompts us to superimpose false identifications on the Self.

Although Ramana’s approach is *Vedāntin* (and not necessarily Shaivite) he regarded each person (even before Realization) as a manifestation of Shiva. As well as recommending the ‘Who am I? question, he could therefore ask: ‘Why not remain as you are?’ By this question, he would provoke people to grow in the manifestation of their inherent nature, rather than be content with their ‘actual’ or ‘empirical’ nature.³⁹⁵ Whatever the actual question posed, Ramana stressed that self-enquiry was only one of the two possible ways of reverting to the Self. The other way was through devotion.

Self-enquiry dissolves the ego by looking for it
and finding it to be non-existent,
whereas devotion surrenders it;

³⁹⁵ The *Vedāntic* approach of *advaitins* has traditionally attracted criticism from some Shaivites. The form of enquiry in *Advaita Vedānta* is said to be so austere that it fosters a ‘disembodied’ attitude. One might imagine certain Christians chiming in, with additional (ill-based) criticisms of Hinduism’s supposed idolatry and pantheism.

therefore both come to the same ego-free goal,
which is all that is required.³⁹⁶

Both ways aim at transcending the boundaries of the individual self, which erroneously considers itself to be separate from others and from the Self. The source of the ego, or of ‘the I-thought’, can be exposed by either path.

If the mind gradually subsides, it does not matter if other things come and go. In the *Gītā*, Lord Krishna says that the devotee is higher than the yogi and that the means to liberation is *bhakti* (devotion) in the form of inherence in the Self, which is one’s own Reality. ... (The mind) is immersed in the Self without the uprising of the ego. ... Can obsessing thoughts arise without the ego, or can there be illusion apart from such thoughts?³⁹⁷

A non-religious way of framing *Advaita Vedānta*’s strong non-dualism would be to turn one’s awareness away from any object and direct it towards awareness ‘in itself’. Ramana maintained that in direct experience we can Realize that we are boundless consciousness or limitless Awareness itself (a.k.a. the *Ātmā* or the Self) while still retaining our diverse concepts. He accepted that we obviously retain a phenomenal ego (or self with a small ‘s’) for day to day functioning, plus a conventional mode of language to go with it. Ramana did not advocate a monastic or hermetic approach, but an ‘everyday’ particularized expression of the true Reality.

³⁹⁶ Cited in Osborne, A., 1987, *op.cit.*, p.160.

³⁹⁷ Tape recording of Ramana, cited in Osborne, A., *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, Weiser, York Beach, ME, 1997, p.38. This particular book was sincerely assembled, but with less than authoritative understandings of either Sanskrit or Tamil. It is now regarded, at the bookshop at Ramana’s ashram, to have been superceded by *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, 2009.

The ego which he opposed (to employ conditioned, phenomenal language) is the false, delusory self which blocks our realization of our identity with the Self. Nonetheless, despite my use of the language of ‘two selves’, it cannot be said that Ramana literally believed in ‘two selves’. It is important to recall that *Advaita* is a derivation from classical *Vedānta*, which does not even allow the possibility of two actual selves. In one of his few writings, Ramana is adamant:

To say ‘I do not know myself’ or ‘I have known myself’ is cause for laughter. What? Are there two selves, one to be known by the other? There is but One, the Truth of the experience of all. The natural and true Reality forever resides in the Heart of all. Not to realize It there and stay in It, but to quarrel: ‘It is’, ‘It is not’; ‘It has form’, ‘It has not form’; ‘It is one’, ‘It is two’, ‘It is neither’, this is the mischief of *maya*. To discern and abide in the ever-present Reality is true attainment.³⁹⁸

The implication of such non-dualism can be framed in a universalist perspective, as in the following remark attributed to Ramana by writer and raconteur Paul Brunton in the 1930s.

When a man knows his true Self, for the first time something else arises from the depths of his being and takes possession of him. That something is behind the mind; it is infinite, divine, eternal. Some people call it the Kingdom of Heaven, others call it the soul and others again Nirvana, and Hindus call it Liberation; you may give it what name you wish. When this happens, a man has not really lost himself; rather he has found himself.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ Extract from Ramana Maharshi’s *Reality in Forty Verses*, published in *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, p.120 (footnoted above).

It is perhaps the case that the unitive experience of Ramana, Traherne, Eckhart and Julian is the *same* experience, interpreted through very different assumptions, languages and concepts. The assumptions and concepts might be incompatible, but the unitive experience itself might be identical. Ramana's advocacy of a quiet mind, leading to greater bodily stillness and therefore to mindfulness and compassion, prompted the following poem.

Restless

Restless as a kite on a loose string,
my mind flits among clouds. Chatter
intrigues, clarifies nothing,

sometimes inspires. Little can be known
by thought, write those who know.
Shorten the agitated thread,
they say, *rein in the kite.*

Let me have insight, not ideas.
Let me know a little truth
and practise stillness.

My mind flits among clouds.
Rein in the kite,
write those who know.
Shorten the agitated thread.

³⁹⁹ Cited in Osborne, A., *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*, Rider and Company, London, 1954, p.20f.

The next chapter revisits the idiom of divine delight and play.⁴⁰⁰ Christ's *kerygma* is taken to have a point of convergence with *Advaita Vedānta*. This, despite the incommensurable nature of *Vedānta* and Christianity. The departure of the separate, egoic self is encouraged, whether in an immediate Realization or progressively. Eckhart's perspective on the *kenotic* life of releasement was discussed in chapter two. His perspective was seen to have a *perichoretic* foundation. The surrounding chapters also canvassed a *Vedāntin*-like participation of humanity with divinity. Traherne's poems and prose (chapter one) were shown to have a relatively unqualified compatibility with aspects of *Advaita Vedānta*. It is now appropriate to continue the trajectory of 'participation', in connection with the tropes of 'waking up' and 'wakefulness'.

⁴⁰⁰ 'God-play' is briefly mentioned in the Introduction to the present study. The play (*lila*) of Shiva Nataraja is mentioned earlier in the chapter above.

Chapter Five: Non-dual ‘Awakening’

The Well

Fatally transgressive,
his poem of divine *I Am*:
the vision too radical,
the experience too vast.
Urged to perform,
he walks alone
to Bethany’s well,
watches birds of prey
climb and slow-wheel.
A woman
lowers leather buckets.
He lingers,
blurs convention’s code,
and listens.

In telling his story of the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4) the writer has a concealed aim of reminding us that we are beneficiaries of others’ work. Tired from travelling, Jesus sits in the well’s shade. His apostles leave to go shopping. Jesus then becomes exhausted through a protracted discussion with the woman, resulting in a shift in her sense of alienation. Those who had shunned her are also able to find greater openness.⁴⁰¹ The apostles wander back, and the writer has Jesus remind them: they are reaping the results of more diligent workers. In my

⁴⁰¹ *pari passu*, the Johannine writer endorses the equal apostolate of women and men.

glance at the story, in the poem above, I allude to the ‘I AM’ of Ex. 3.⁴⁰² We know that elsewhere in John’s Gospel, Jesus is represented as appropriating the divine ‘I AM’. We also know that before the Gospels were written, the Epistles of Paul were already declaring the embodiment of the divine.⁴⁰³

Awakening to a redefinition of boundaries

The Pauline gospel centres on Christ as the deliverer of humankind.⁴⁰⁴ Potential reconciliation between God and the entire material order is put forward, as a result of the embodiment of the divine in Jesus the man, who becomes the Christ.⁴⁰⁵ Even material objects are said to come within the ambit of reconciliation. According to Phil. 2, humanity’s preconceived ideas of the divine are emptied out, under the sign of the radical openness of Jesus. It would appear that ‘the form of God’ is emptied out of traditional notions of ‘almightiness’ and of ‘exclusivity’. The experience of non-exclusivity is pertinent to the present study. I have taken non-

⁴⁰² The reported statements of Jesus regarding ‘I am ...’ (*ego eimi*), which are the subject of innumerable disquisitions, seem to branch out from the Johannine prologue and its multiple use of the verb ‘to be’ (*einai*).

⁴⁰³ Laurel C. Schneider explores what it might mean to speak of an embodied God, in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, Routledge, London, 2008. She holds that divine unity is best configured through an acceptance of multiplicity, viz, that the Incarnation is concerned with necessarily multiple and mutable bodies. Referring to the story of the woman at the well (pp.117-120) Schneider relates the water to movement, to the kind of fluidity that might augment habitually static views of God.

⁴⁰⁴ A recent study of the heart of *Romans* has affirmed a less individualistic and more participatory reading of the apostle than is often allowed. Douglas A. Campbell’s very substantial study, entitled *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2009) argues that Ro. 5-8 is central to the Pauline account of deliverance and sanctification (rather than Ro. 1-4 and its conventional yielding, at least in conservative North American Protestantism, of a theology of justification). *In nuce*: ‘Paul’s account of sanctification is the gospel’ (p.934).

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Col.1:19-20 NRSV: ‘For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.’

exclusivity and ‘framed it’, or part of it, as ‘moderate non-dualism’. The motif of non-dualism has helped to structure my forays into Traherne, Eckhart and Julian. All three sought to ground their work in experience as well as in scripture. When they emphasize the experience of faith, and the *kenotic* obedience of faith, they share common ground in their expressions of connectedness. It could be said that they pose certain questions and address these questions to the governing ethos of domination, in the first instance. They might then address these questions to the ‘counterforce’ of domination; namely, excessive individualism. Their expressions of spirituality might here be construed as pre-figuring something modern and postmodern.⁴⁰⁶ They are theopoets who attempt, within different frameworks, to reduce separation by drawing subject and object closer together.

There are degrees of ‘awakening’ and degrees of integration.⁴⁰⁷ A person who is regarded as ‘awake’, and who attracts followers, might well turn out to be a person who remains undeveloped in certain areas. If I feel I have more ‘answers’ than you, I am likely to project unreal qualities and values onto you. My experience of apparent ‘awakening’ would need to be integrated over a period of time, within my community. I would otherwise be at risk of meddling in others’ lives. As already stated, some form of union with the divine is traditionally seen as the basis for human *perichoretic* relations. Genuine community is always possible. In some way, we are able to identify with ‘the Whole’ and yet a sense of personal, subjective existence is not lost. Our actions are said to be like God’s actions: creative. In Eckhartian terms, we become what we *are*. This theme was famously taken up by Nietzsche. Who are we?

⁴⁰⁶ This is not to imply that postmodernism is a singular intellectual entity.

⁴⁰⁷ I assume the following: if we are taken to one horizon of ‘awakening’, another horizon will open up before us. In other words, at the level of conventional truth, our spiritual evolution cannot be said to reach an end point.

To Eckhart, we are the continuing and continuous incarnation of Christ. If I understand Eckhart here, I begin to go about seeing things from the divine perspective, as Eckhart endeavours to do in his theo-philosophy. I will imagine, and will begin to manifest, less of a distinction between me and you. I might even acknowledge less of a distinction between me and the Buddha, me and the Christ, me and Ramana.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this perspective regards incarnation as an unfinished, on-going narrative. This view also resists the traditional claim that the doctrine of the Incarnation relates to an absolute event, understood as ‘out of time’.⁴⁰⁸ What if the Incarnation was imagined as more of a creating, circulating expression of embodiment?⁴⁰⁹ This might relate to the Thomistic *circuitus spiritualis*. Creativity flares up, dies down, and flares up somewhere else. Expressive acts establish new things. Yet, as always, these new things participate in the general impermanence. But in the diminution of ever-fading productions, the conditions are to hand to stimulate new creations. It is the Spirit which is held (by all three writers under discussion) to ‘apply’ or ‘manifest’ the continuing incarnation. The Spirit attracts humanity and nurtures it to recall its true identity. The Spirit is the Welcoming Ineffable: it is the Other which is transcendently immanent. Accordingly, it turns out to be *not other*. Thus the transcendence is more horizontal than vertical. Such thoughts prompted the following poem.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. Jens Zimmermann, who writes: ‘Theology must shed any pretensions to timeless, absolute knowledge and will do itself a great favor by abandoning a scientific model of unmediated, naked truth. Instead theology should embrace a hermeneutical model of self-understanding in which truth is not naked but clothed in the self-giving otherness of God, who offers himself in the incarnation for our contemplation and emulation. The incarnation provides what postmodern ethical philosophy seeks: it embodies radical transcendence in history and time with a human face, and it offers a social subjectivity as persons in relation.’ Quotation from: Zimmermann, J., *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p.318.

⁴⁰⁹ As, indeed, the body goes about its work of creating. Bodies obviously are continually circulating, absorbing and disseminating, prompting this thought: does not all creativity perpetually *circulate*?

Best Spiritual Practice

Best spiritual practice is to drop the word Best,
the word Spiritual, the word Practice;
is to re-enter your own garden,
find each flower turned
to the light.

The Spirit ‘outs’ itself; is always outgoing; is the outlook that ‘goes out’. Eckhart seldom uses the words ‘Holy Spirit’. He uses the words ‘God’ and ‘Godhead’ most of all, but we know from his discussions of the Trinity that his pneumatology is traditional. In general terms, Julian and Traherne also have a traditional pneumatology. The Spirit is that which stimulates a perception of *who* Jesus is, existentially, and *where* or *in whom* he is manifesting. In the following writing, I try to say that this kind of recognition is more likely to be internal, embodied and affective than narrowly cognitive.

On the Rim

In the present dark,
our bodies,
these portable monasteries,
poise on the rim of silence.
Brought here by someone’s touch,
our narrowing attention
enters the practice of stillness.

Perhaps a teacher
with the spirit's fullness,
or a disinterested friend,
touched us from a quiet place
where words no longer dominate.
It could have been elders
less concerned
with what they can control
than with openness
to infinite expansion.
Likely as not, they still cavort somewhere,
holding together opposites,
willing to commit themselves to outcomes
of which they can have no inkling,
pleased to bear the unexplained, the vague;
happy to reply *don't know*
to a vital question
and not feel ignorant,
or, not knowing what to do,
remain present
to another who needs presence
Touched, somewhere,
by one such being
with tinctures of this recognition,
we began to be still,
began to see:
all that matters is embodiment,
these envelopes of sense and soul.
To be faithful to the vision,
to the action:
all that matters

is the felt communion,
unspeakable communion
in the silent depths.
Here's our surrender, beyond all seeking.
Here, the inexhaustible meaning.
It's not separate from the vision,
from the action.
Not separate
from This.

Perhaps the intention of Julian, Eckhart and Traherne could partly be expressed by 'openness to infinite expansion' (above). From the perspective of theopoetics, the kind of truth which might be accessible to openness is not 'factual'. It lies deeper than 'facts', to which *meaning* can never be reduced. That which might be dubbed 'true Truth' has to do with the margins of the experience of sublimity (*Erhabenheit*). In Christian discourses, the Spirit can render the sublime to be accessible to any person, whether or not they are in possession of relevant 'facts'. That is to say, the sublime becomes experience-able (*erfahrbar*). The poem above makes a claim that 'all that matters is embodiment'. It is here that the factual zone can assume its importance. The fact is: I am a body; I have evolved to be 'on the look out' for another body. I desire bodily contact, desire that my body should be 'transcorporeal' and not fragmented. Perhaps I thereby desire to transcend time and place. But I do not wish for bodily contact only. I desire a deeper 'interactive knowing', for which embodiment is the ground.

Maximus, classically orthodox, gave currency to the words 'reciprocal interchange'. He wrote that any person who chose to, could be involved in reciprocal interchange with the divine.

Maximus' basis for this view was his moderate non-dualism,⁴¹⁰ garnered (it would appear) from pseudo-Dionysius but given a very different and more directly biblical interpretation.⁴¹¹ In the view of Lars Thunberg (1995) Maximus believed that 'Nature and grace are not in opposition to each other, for when human nature is truly developed, it is open to divine grace which establishes that relation to God for which human nature is created.'⁴¹²

Maximus and his predecessors wrote of the condition of *theosis*, a word meant to include the notion of bodily exchange as part of the divine's relation to humanity. *Theosis* was not purely an abstract relation, because salvation was not abstract. Salvation happened through 'transcorporeal relationality', as a present-moment event.⁴¹³ An apparent experience of the divine was not necessarily conceived as exalted or ethereal; it did not have to be 'transcendent' in an abstract and other-worldly sense.⁴¹⁴ Anastasius of Sinai qualified the views on *theosis* put forward by Maximus (his near contemporary) by stating that *theosis* implied 'neither a diminution nor an alteration of (human) nature'.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁰ I am grateful to Cullan Joyce for explaining that perichoresis is employed by Maximus and other patristics as a kind of synonym for non-duality. (Pseudo-Dionysius is well-known to have provided a version of divine relations which is compatible with non-dualistic interpretations. His work is outside the range of the present study.)

⁴¹¹ Maximus brings the apophatic recognition of unknowable transcendence directly back to earth, i.e., to his trust in the divine incarnation of Jesus who becomes the Christ. See, for example, 'Chapters on Knowledge' in *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings*, Berthold, G.C., (ed. & trans.) Paulist Press, New York, NY, 1985, pp.127-179.

⁴¹² Thunberg, L., *Microcosm and Mediator: the Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Open Court, Chicago, ILL, 1995, 2nd ed., p.433f.

⁴¹³ The importance, to Eckhart, of the lived experience of truth was discussed in chapter two (where, as elsewhere, I have co-opted the sub-continental term Realization). Julian and Traherne 'enact' their apparent experience of immediacy within their prose and poetry; they theorize less than Eckhart, although all three writers are capable of issuing injunctions to the hearer or reader to enter direct (unmediated?) experience of the 'matter in hand' (cf. the Buddhist 'Great Matter').

⁴¹⁴ The putative indivisibility of 'pure' transcendence and immanence has been briefly canvassed in chapter two and *passim*.

⁴¹⁵ The quotation is sourced from *Byzantine Philosophy* by Basil Tatakis (N.J. Moutafakis, trans. & intro.) Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, IN, 2003 [1949] p.67.

A kenotic view of the divine

To extend a central motif of chapter four, the metaphor of Trinity is taken to express relational qualities, beyond or in consonance with traditional Greek and Latin concerns with ontology. Our experience of the divine then incorporates an understanding ‘... of a Triune God who in transcendent, incarnate, and immanent vulnerability is familiar with suffering and bears cosmic grief’.⁴¹⁶ Such expressions, freed from the implications of remote omnipotence and omniscience, are likely to remain central to Christianity. From my moderately non-dual position, part of the appeal of such expressiveness is the potential redefinition of the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘others’. For example, let me suppose that I could regard you, a reader of this, with a degree of care. And suppose that I knew that you could feel this, bodily. Likewise, let me say that you, for your part, look upon me with care and that I feel this, bodily. I penetrate to the depth of *your* heart, so to say. Conversely, you penetrate to the depth of *my* heart. I find myself, my deeper self, *in you*. You find your deeper self, *in me*. The sense of duality is dispersed.

Within an ‘absolute’ non-dualism (as within thorough-going *Advaita Vedānta*) the sense of duality is (arguably) dispersed entirely. A rationalistic Christian framework cannot countenance a total dispersal. The fullness (*plerôma*) is held to inhere in Jesus; eventually this fullness is that which ‘fills all in all’ (Eph. 1:23, NRSV). The angle of vision which Jesus

⁴¹⁶ These words are those of Gloria L. Schaab. See her *The Creative Suffering of the Triune God*, Oxford University Press, NY, 2007, p.194. Schaab unpacks the Trinitarian motif as follows: ‘By sharing the suffering of the beloved creation, the Triune God demonstrates that suffering itself is not redemptive and salvific. Rather, it is the love, the creativity, and the infinite possibility within the Divine that are redemptive through continuous creativity, unconditional presence, and freely offered grace’ (*ibid.*, p.195).

provided is held out to be an angle on the divine nature, which is seen to be both self-emptying and full. A *kenotic* life, lived-out by a follower of Jesus, is held to be incompatible with defensive posturing. Dogmatic statements are likely to be argued in a spirit of inclusiveness (and kept to a minimum). Wherever metaphysics might be required, it will be a metaphysics of attempted explanation and not of certainty.⁴¹⁷ Jesus himself is voided, so to speak; he is emptied out. He does not assert a final identity, but devotes himself to his perception of the Father's will *as itself kenotic*.⁴¹⁸

Such a *kenotic* picture of the divine dovetails with a redefinition of the boundaries between 'me' and 'you', above. Christ's body is said to be continually re-incarnated in our own bodies. The tradition, adhered to by Traherne in common with Eckhart and Julian, has a high regard for embodiment and what it entails. Communion has priority over sacrifice, because communion is 'holy': it is wholesome and wholeness-making. The defeat of fear and the establishment of communion are inseparable from the salvation story. The tradition assumes that Christian communities will manifest agapeic, all-embracing reciprocity. This is to be the normal outcome of an experience of God. As within the Godhead, when imagined as triune, relationships are to be experienced as *perichoretic*.⁴¹⁹ Abiding in the divine, God's children will see themselves as

⁴¹⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, whose concern with 'Christian idolaters' is mentioned in the present study, is one of many theologians who attempt to '... do theology without reinscribing it in metaphysics' (Horner, p.74). Indeed, he '... claims to overcome metaphysics by way of theology' (*ibid.*). See Robyn Horner's *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theological Introduction*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Aldershot, HANTS., 2005. See also Kevin Hart (ed.), *Counter Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2007.

⁴¹⁸ I discuss the *kenotic* hymn of Phil. 2 in chapter four. As to the claim that Christ reflects the divine fullness (*plerôma*) and conveys it to his Church, see Eph.1:17-23; 3:14-19; Col. 1:19-20; 2:8-10.

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Catherine LaCugna (1952-97) who writes: '... God and the creature ... meet as persons in communion. ... A relational ontology focuses on personhood, relationship, and communion as the modality of all existence.' Quotation from: LaCugna, C.M., *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 1991, p.250.

inter-existing. They are inter-involved because a union with God has been established. This, despite the fact that the surface consciousness might not experience the union.⁴²⁰

Raimon Panikkar and pluralism

Panikkar's Christianized interpretation of *Advaita Vedānta* is perhaps a pointer to where Christian non-dualism could be heading. There are aporetic difficulties for conservatives: Panikkar might not sufficiently balance a strong experiential tone (reminiscent of Ramana) with an adequate propositional basis. Although Panikkar (d.2010) did not see himself as a post-modern theologian, he might be regarded by conservatives as blurring distinctions. For example, he arguably reduces 'meaning' to 'experience' and to the subjective conditions of what he deems to be an appropriate spiritual life. This puzzle, of tipping the balance against propositional content, might not be resolvable.⁴²¹ Perhaps Panikkar himself did not regard a resolution as either possible or desirable. His work will grow in world-wide esteem, not least because he 'opened up' spiritual life to the ways in which our imagination discerns the unrestrained flow of the divine spirit.

Panikkar believes the divine to be ontologically transcendent. But he also conceives of the divine as emergent possibility. He understands spiritual and religious development to be part

⁴²⁰ Cf. Jn 15.

⁴²¹ The word 'puzzle' could be preferable to 'aporia' because of the latter's traditional connotation *vis-à-vis* a processive discourse coming up against an aporia which eventually shows the process to have structural problems. The puzzlement with Panikkar might be of a lesser order, and might relate to the necessary ambiguity of his attempt to reconcile corporeality with transcendent subjectivity.

of the evolutionary process. A personal consciousness must arise before a transpersonal consciousness can develop. By means of the latter, humanity can participate with God in developing the immanent sphere by means of transcendent values. Panikkar appears to have added modern cosmology and transpersonal psychology to Ramana's *Advaita Vedānta*. This represents an advance on the anthropocentric consciousness and dualistic metaphysics of much of modernity. We might fantasize that Eckhart would have approved, especially where the apophatic is informed by the biblically kataphatic.

As implied earlier, a potential difficulty with Panikkar is the status of propositional truth claims. He affirms the relative value of all religions, while at the same time disavowing relativism. He maintains that any person can experience Otherness whenever they have a direct awareness of their contingency. In a disarming emphasis on relationality, Panikkar allows a full diversity of religious perspectives to flourish. So much so, that obvious socio-political problems (such as the tolerance of violence, the oppression of women, and all manner of self-serving appeals to divine authority) are potentially elided in naïve optimism. If it is granted that the voices of truth are irreducibly plural, there remains the need for an existential approach that refuses to occlude serious questions in a system of universal, spiritual *laissez-faire*. Panikkar's model is 'intra-religious' rather than 'inter-Faith'. He advocates a move away from exterior understandings of other traditions, in the hope that these traditions should become interior experiences. The designation 'intra-religious' indicates that the best starting point is an exchange of experiences rather than of teachings. The key experience or Realization is that the apparent 'other' is disclosed to be none other than myself (or, Myself).

Although Panikkar believes that anyone can experience Otherness, he does not claim that the experience of Otherness is necessarily the same thing as experiencing God. He is careful to state that 'It is impossible to experience God as substance and transcendence, and there is no knowledge of the Infinite'.⁴²² Yet, through my knowledge of contingency, I can 'touch' the Infinite 'at a point'.⁴²³ My frailty is therefore the paradoxical place of experiencing the Mystery. 'The Christian expression of this contact is *Incarnation*. A different language would tell us that in the experience of *samsāra* we touch *nirvana*'.⁴²⁴

We cannot experience an exclusively immanent God,
which we would confuse with a pantheistic identity.
Nor can we experience an exclusively transcendent God,
which would be contradictory in itself. Instead, we meet God
in *relationship*.⁴²⁵

As with many pluralists, Panikkar makes value judgments on the basis of his understanding of an ultimate referent. He writes of the many paths (psychological, traditional and personal) to the experience of divinity.

God belongs neither to the one nor the other, neither to the good
nor the wicked: God transcends all our words and faculties.
In this experience of empty transcendence, we experience the void;

⁴²² Panikkar, R., *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2006, p.136.

⁴²³ *ibid.*, p.142.

⁴²⁴ *ibid.*, p.136.

⁴²⁵ *ibid.* Basically, Panikkar understands the structure of Reality to be triadic: it is comprised of the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic. These three participate in 'radical relativity'; that is to say, they are dependent on each other. This dependence is described by Panikkar as 'interdependence'. See Panikkar's exposition of his main ideas in *The Rhythm of Being (op.cit.)*.

we encounter emptiness and ultimately silence.⁴²⁶

Panikkar believes that the experience of God is *subjective genitive*; in other words, it is God's experience. It is '... the experience that *God* has, not of a solipsistic self, but of a Trinitarian and hence relational and participative Being in which we and all creation enter'.⁴²⁷ The Trinity is exemplary: it is the paradigm of relationality. There is both equality and difference. A little earlier, Panikkar writes: 'God is not an object – either of faith or experience. It is the experience *of* God that occurs within me, in which I participate more or less consciously'.⁴²⁸

The principal non-dual passages in John's Gospel were cited in chapter two of this study. These are '... the Father is in me and I am in the Father' (Jn 10:38, NRSV) and 'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30, NRSV). Panikkar writes that such verses represent 'neither a pantheistic confusion nor a negation of personality'.⁴²⁹ They are, instead, a declaration of experience. The experience is as follows:

... if I do not desire anything for my ego,
I am everything and have everything.
I am one with the source
insofar as I too act as a source
by making everything which I have received
flow again – just like Jesus.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁶ *ibid.*, p.134.

⁴²⁷ *ibid.*, p.140.

⁴²⁸ *ibid.*, p.137.

⁴²⁹ *Christophany: the Fullness of Man*, Orbis, NY, 2004, p.115.

⁴³⁰ *ibid.*, p.116.

Colloquial notions of ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ are somewhat subverted by Panikkar, as they are, in very different languages, by Traherne, Eckhart and Julian. My (small-s) self will be emptied out, so that my (true) Self will be uncovered as my real nature, with ability to love the other as my-self. I have noted that *perichoresis* literally means ‘dance around’.⁴³¹ Panikkar uses ‘interwoven’ to illustrate *perichoresis*.⁴³² He echoes the metaphor of knitting used by Julian to illustrate two truths that are dear to her. First, humanity is already ‘oned’ with the divine; second, humanity is still progressing to a full experience of ‘oneing’.⁴³³ There is a mutual reciprocity, as follows:

Dancing with Sophia

She comes to meet me from the inside,
with love not linked to personal desire,
love not drawn to any attribute of mine.
What I thought didn’t exist, is nearer than near.
‘Who *are* you?’ she asks, she asks silently,
as if nothing else matters, as if constantly tripping
over my own thoughts is part of the dance.

The dance of polarities, or rather, of apparent polarities, is potentially in conflict with a post-Enlightenment obsession with classification. Taxonomies, which are frequently hierarchical, can be necessary, useful, artificial and delusory all at the same time. Theopoetics, on the other hand, is most ‘unscientific’ in its depiction of the divine as neither wholly other (dualism) nor

⁴³¹ In the Introduction to the present study.

⁴³² Panikkar, R., 2006, *op.cit.*, p.139.

⁴³³ Since humankind first gained the leisure to listen to campfire stories, perhaps it has often been the theopoets who have stimulated others towards a return to strands of filiation, to ‘interweave’; to, indeed, ‘oneing’.

as wholly not-other (monism). Although infinite and hence transcendent, the divine is paradoxically ‘delimited’ (from the perspective of conventional truth) by the materiality of creation. Indeed, it would appear to be ‘delimited’ by my personal, material desires. Panikkar puts it as follows: ‘(God) exists only in its polarity, in its relationship. God is relationship, intimate internal relationship with all’.⁴³⁴

Such a move appears likely to offend the heirs of those who were offended by Eckhart’s aporetic. But Panikkar nuances his position as follows. Reality, he maintains, runs deeper than truth. Beyond relativism, objectivism and separatist doctrinal truth-claims, the divine remains as that Being which cannot be grasped in any dimension. The divine can, however, be accessed in mutual reciprocity by means of the symbolic and the mythic. Panikkar concedes the incompatibility of diverse conceptions of ultimacy, and he is wary of the potential idolatry of reason. He nominates his vision as ‘cosmotheandric’. Christ is the embodiment of ‘cosmotheandricism’. On the other hand, each person is a Christophany.⁴³⁵ Mutual reciprocity is expressed by Herman Brood⁴³⁶ as follows: ‘Dear Lord, We accept You as I am.’ Such outrageous panache might have pleased both Traherne and Panikkar, except that the latter is a post-modern theologian who relativizes every propositional attempt to encapsulate ‘truth’ and appears to place experience, *per se*, at a premium. I find it appropriate to align Panikkar more with Ramana than with classical Christianity. But Panikkar does not, to my knowledge, identify himself as *Advaitin*.

⁴³⁴ Panikkar, R., 2006, *op.cit.*, p.63.

⁴³⁵ Panikkar, R., 2004, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

⁴³⁶ Dutch musician/visual artist (1946-2001).

In chapter one of this study I related Traherne to *Advaita Vedānta*. One of Traherne's theopoetic descendents is Andrew Harvey, who writes of 'the direct path' and its complexion of non-dual consciousness.

Plato's philosophers, having seen the illusion of the world
return to the world to teach others about it; the Zen master
after realizing that 'nothing is real' returns to the 'real' to help
others liberate themselves; those who follow the Christ follow him
beyond all the temptations of power and false transcendence
into the depths of an abandoned self-donation to all beings;
those who have taken the bodhisattva vow in Mahāyāna Buddhism
pledge themselves to return to the world of pain and constriction
forever until every sentient creature is finally liberated.⁴³⁷

How can self-donation be effective, for anything? How can non-power, a chosen way of disempowerment, be powerful? The potential answers become clearer if the source of experience, and the impetus for non-dual relationships, carries with it the givenness of intersubjectivity. From such a perspective, self-emptying is the way things *are*. We do not so much 'empty ourselves' as surrender to what is already the case. Or rather, to get away from undue connotations of will power, we *see* something of the reality and are conscious participants in it. If 'reality' is equated with God, then God obviously is beyond comparison;

⁴³⁷ Harvey, A., *The Direct Path: Creating a Journey to the Divine Through the World's Mystical Traditions*, Broadway Books, NY, 2000, p.60.

but, *apropos* divine incomprehensibility, Eckhart holds that we participate in the Nothingness of God; we share in the ‘Is-ness’ of God.⁴³⁸

Formal power and authority is re-interpreted, against the grain of the lesser or egoic self’s first impulse. Gradually, we integrate the awareness that we are not so much substantial selves as ‘relational events’. Our awareness of finitude (and of the self-deceptions of the little self) constrains the desire to claim absolute finality with regard to ‘possession’ of truth. But when we overlook the limits of language, we tend to reify our concepts and to erect idols. As Panikkar everywhere stresses, we falsely conceive ourselves to be separate selves. Very likely, then, that we should fantasize that God is peculiarly related to ‘me and my group’. Any idol, as a conceptual construction of the mind, is commonly seen as a danger to actual faith. Jean-Luc Marion⁴³⁹ could be consolidating Panikkar’s position when he suggests (in an off-handed way) that *Agape* might be a suitable name for ‘God’. This is because Marion has a particular concern with the worship of idols within Christianity, such as a reified ‘God’ as distinct from the true God beyond conception. If I have over-confidence in the concept ‘God’, I will lack sufficient openness to that which transcends my concept.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁸ As discussed in chapter two, Eckhart uses either *niht* or *nihil* for ‘nothingness’. Creatures share nothingness, but divine nothingness is a positive figuration, pointing to the divine as beyond all being (therefore *niht*). As to is-ness (*Isticheit*) the term *wesen* (‘being’ in McGinn *et al*, *op. cit.*) is more common in Eckhart, as of course is *esse* (trans. as ‘existence’ and ‘act of existence’ by McGinn *et al.*)

⁴³⁹ In *God Without Being* (trans. T.A. Carlson) Chicago University Press, Chicago, ILL, 1991,p.82.

⁴⁴⁰ McFague argues that the conceptual language of religion amounts to poetry that has become exhausted. The only possible theology, therefore, is metaphorical theology. Conceptual thought, which generates doctrine, retains value wherever it critiques the leading metaphors of a particular time and place. When metaphors cease to complement each other, writes McFague, they readily become idols. To counter an idolatry of the ‘God the Father’ metaphor, she proposes ‘God as Friend’ as a possible replacement. See McFague, S., *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1982.

Hence the strong emphasis, within Judeo-Christian tradition, that the Word of God lies *beyond* the physical text which talks about God. The Word is regarded as more dissonant and destabilizing than we might at first suspect. Eckhart, Julian and Traherne appear to concur here. Theologians of recent centuries were not the first to attempt to name God as the ever-ungraspable, Unnameable One. More to the point, they did not invent the language which refers to the depths of inter-being or of inter-penetration. This is the language of the *perichoretic* experience. It is modelled on the inner life of the Trinity; it expresses a love which is immediate and mutual. It is enacted now, here. Within this love, the expectations of an individualistic ego, intent on establishing itself, are dismantled. Just as the language of substance or essence tends to collapse, the language of separate identity will tend to collapse. In its place will be a deeper awareness of flux, of contingency, and of the liberation which the ‘*kenotic* constant’ (the life-within-God) both enables and energizes.

Parallel ways of relating

Eckhart’s Japanese contemporary, Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253) wrote of the ‘original truth’ of human identity in terms of non-dual consciousness. On this matter, the two exemplary thinkers are at one. In the sermons of the Meister, the letting-be or releasement of *Gelâzenheit* functions as an overcoming of dualisms in a way that is consonant with Dōgen’s non-dualism. But it is common knowledge that Dōgen regarded an experience of ‘pure presence’ as available to humankind, without mediation (and ‘before’ interpretation). Part of the puzzle with Eckhart is his ambiguity on this point. Whereas Dōgen held ‘ultimate truth’ to be available as ‘a direct

apprehension' (genjōkōan), this question remains aporetic in Eckhart. There is a concurrence (of sorts) between Dōgen and the Eckhartian divine birth in the soul (as being 'of the moment' and yet progressive). But Eckhart remains Christian; he will resist a clear, unambiguous ontological identification of humanity with ultimacy.

Schürmann cautions that a Soto Zen interpretation of Eckhart on *Gelâzenheit* does not work. This is because there is a God who authors and enables *Gelâzenheit*.

...God's essential being, releasement, becomes the being of a released man. The disturbing power of Eckhart's theory of releasement consists precisely in the transformation of a psychological or moral concept into an ontological one. Man's way of being turns into God's way of being. The mind can achieve total vacuity of attachment only because God follows the mind on this road and leads it back into the divine 'desert'. The double annihilation of human and divine properties constitutes one and the same conquest of releasement, as being's essential way to be.⁴⁴¹

Schürmann also warns against assuming that when different authors 'think the ineffable' they are thinking of the *same* ineffable.⁴⁴² But Harvey sees the value of Dōgen for meditative practice. He follows Dōgen's way of discovering '... your essential self beyond the mind'.

To discover what Dōgen calls the 'original truth' within us is to know ourselves linked to every other sentient being and thing in the universe. When we plummet deep into our real nature, the boundaries that separate us from the rest of the world start to disappear.

⁴⁴¹ Schürmann, R., 2001, *op.cit.*, p.219.

⁴⁴² *ibid.*, p.221.

The duality of subject and object, I and other, knower and known,
starts to dissolve; gradually, we are opened to a bare, naked,
transcendental way of knowing that over time becomes a force
of clear love that connects us effortlessly, naturally, and transparently
to all things.⁴⁴³

For Dōgen there can be no substantial or self-existing ‘self’. Personal authenticity is only available through the concepts of emptiness and of dependent co-arising. And yet these are not treated as concepts. They are treated as the background through which I can directly experience reality, without having recourse to concepts. It was mentioned in chapter two of this study that Eckhart’s concern with *Gelâzenheit* does not lead him to the hermetic life.⁴⁴⁴ There is a contiguity of interest, here, with Hindu tradition. Prior to the emergence of Dōgen’s Buddhism, the Bhagavad Gītā had taught non-attached activity as the way to transcend the duality of self and other, or of subject and object.

The wise see that there is action in the midst of inaction
and inaction in the midst of action. Their consciousness
is unified, and every act is done with complete awareness.
The awakened sages call a person wise when all his undertakings
are free from anxiety about results; all his selfish desires
have been consumed in the fire of knowledge.
The wise, ever satisfied, have abandoned all external supports.

⁴⁴³Harvey, A., *op.cit.*, p.110.

⁴⁴⁴ Drawing a contrast between mystics and activists, Harvey (2009) relates his experiences of both sides: ‘Mystics, I saw, were mostly addicted to being, activists to doing. Both had profound narcissistic shadows that I recognized in myself. The mystic’s shadow was a surreal dissociation from the body, the world, and the gruelling tasks of implementing justice. The activist’s shadow lay in the messiah and martyr complexes that accompany the addiction to *doing*, with its vulnerability to burnout, rage, and despair.’ Quotation from: Harvey, A., *The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism*, Hay House, Inc., Carlsbad, CA, p.58.

Their security is unaffected by the results of their action;
even while acting, they really do nothing at all.⁴⁴⁵

First, the reader is reminded of the need for action; second, she or he is invited to act without attachment to a goal. To identify with a goal is to be identified with thought. This identification gives rise to a false sense of duality, as between *the mind* with its intention to act with a certain result in view, and *the body* which will perform the action to obtain the result. The context of the passage above is counsel given to the reluctant ‘warrior’ Arjuna by his old friend Krishna (who at first is not recognized as a divine incarnation). Perhaps a broader context is the author’s need to respond to interpretations of *Vedānta* by the yogic schools, some of which favoured withdrawal from community life. The *Gītā* is regarded by many as one of the later Upanishads, although it is usually found as an insertion in the Mahabharata. In written form, the Upanishads date from the second century BCE; they form part of the large *Vedic* body of literature. The theopoeists who produced the *Vedas* (lit. ‘Knowledge’) chose the indefinite term ‘That’ to designate the Infinite, which no word or name could attempt to define without implying a limit to the unlimited. Can the Infinite be meaningfully discussed at all? Acknowledging this question, the *Vedic* theopoeists evoked humanity’s deepest experiential dimension and settled on the declaration *Tat tvam asi*. It is translated below as ‘You are That’.

As bees suck nectar from many a flower
and make their honey one, so that no drop
can say, ‘I am from this flower or that,’
all creatures, though one, know not they are that One.
There is nothing that does not come from him.
Of everything he is the inmost Self.

⁴⁴⁵ BgG 4:18-20; trans. Easwaran E, 1985, p.87.

He is the truth; he is the Self supreme.
You are That. ... You are That.

As the rivers flowing east and west
merge in the sea and become one with it,
forgetting they were ever separate streams,
so do all creatures lose their separateness
when they merge at last into pure Being.
There is nothing that does not come from him.
Of everything he is the inmost Self.

He is the truth; he is the Self supreme.
You are That. ... You are That.⁴⁴⁶

The phrase *Tat tvam asi*, translated here as ‘You are That’, could be taken to mean: ‘You are Consciousness’. Or, if I favour an emphasis on process and on the ‘unfinishedness’ of language, I might prefer the following meaning: ‘I have a part within the creative principle of the universe.’ Literally the Sanskrit is ‘That thou art’. If the resonance of ‘thou’ has been lost today, we might say ‘You are It’ or ‘You are That’, as above. The context within the Upanishad⁴⁴⁷ is instruction by the sage Uddalaka to his son. The son, Svetaketu, has returned home after twelve years with a guru. But he has returned with intellectual pride instead of Realization. The historic purpose of *Tat tvam asi* could be said to be that of a mantra which helps a disciple to make some sense of an experience of identification, or trans-identification. It is not necessarily intended to serve as a metaphysical equation. As ‘the great utterance’ of the Upanishads, it implies that the ‘I’ should ideally refer, not to the little self or ego (of

⁴⁴⁶ Chāndogya Up. 6:9-10; trans. Easwaran E, 1995, p.184f.

⁴⁴⁷ See footnote 58 of the present study.

phenomenal or conditioned discourse) but to the Self (limitless Awareness; pure Consciousness). In the language of absolute truth, the Self can be thought of as indistinguishable from the Reality which many people call ‘God’. It is a commonplace that the *Vedic* theopoeists respected concepts, but not as ends in themselves. Buddhistic developments later employed a more nuanced vocabulary, partly in order to set aside overly-personalized concepts of a deity or deities. But the conviction remained that Reality was encountered beyond words and concepts.⁴⁴⁸

In the poem below, I express a little of what this implies. For six months or so, a small tiger snake had been part of our garden’s beauty. It prompted admiration on our part and a degree of nervous awareness. The poem’s reference to ‘the one thing’ is from a conversation between Jesus and Martha and Mary, reported in Luke 10. I also had in mind the experience of *tathatā*, the Buddhist ‘suchness’ or experience of things (purportedly) ‘as they really are’. It could be said that ‘suchness’ expresses in a positive way what ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) expresses negatively.

The One Thing

A small snake rests its head
on a wandering geranium leaf.
Tucked up in a bed of greenery,
tattooed by light,

⁴⁴⁸ A summary of the *Vedas* might be: the *Vedas* acknowledge one ultimate truth, the supreme Spirit. This Spirit has innumerable immanent aspects, yet infinitely transcends all of them. As to Buddhism, see footnote 5 for three types of non-dualism recognized by Buddhist scholar/practitioner David Loy. Loy claims that Buddhist ‘ungroundedness’ amounts to being the source of spirituality. Our surrender to ‘ungroundedness’ discloses it to be formless and limitless. Hence Loy can adhere to a notion of transcendence, albeit one that would seem to exclude a Hindu or Judeo-Christian vision of inherent Ultimacy.

a tremulous blunt nose
and broad head shield
rest in a dappled place,
a minutely particular
paradise.

The snake eases sideways
to obscurity.

One thing is necessary:
awareness of presence.
No longer *us here* and *snake there*,
but a simple abiding,
beyond the sinewy slippage of language.

Jesus is represented as asserting ‘one thing is necessary’. The narrator depicts him as confident that his intuitive insights into reality are accurate. He is not interested in having a title or in being authenticated by external authority in some other way. His authority is self-authenticating.⁴⁴⁹ In this regard Jesus resembles a Hindu *rishi* whose experiential knowledge of Self-realization is so deep that other people intuitively recognize it. Hinduism is powerful at this point: it provides stimulus to Self-realization, the true experience of the *Ātmā* (or the eternal Self). Buddhism, on the other hand, enunciates a parallel experience, that of awakening or enlightenment (*bodhi*). In its very different way, Christianity might in part be said to aim at

⁴⁴⁹ I am indebted, for some of these words, to Albert Nolan. When I was accorded a grant to study as an undergraduate at Cambridge, two special books came my way. These led me to look beyond the vitiated theism and the effete structures of the anthropocentric and hierarchical church. Nolan’s *Jesus Before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1977) was one; the other was W.H.Vanstone’s *Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1977). These books also helped me to see past my disapproval of the narcissism of evangelists. Billy Graham ran a severely dualistic ‘campaign’ in Cambridge while I was there. True to his conditioning, he announced his disdain for theologians, including by implication those people who translated the (RSV) bible which he brandished.

a reconfiguration of both of the above. Was it influenced by both traditions? The Gospel, enunciated by Paul and later narrated in the canonical Gospels, is intended to evoke an on-going change of personal direction in life. This is what is meant by the Greek word *metanoia*, or openness to conversion. Following a switch in orientation, transformation or progressive ‘deification’ follows, through active receptivity to grace. To write very generally, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, while incompatible at the dogmatic level, are agreed that techniques and methodologies are not to be regarded as ends in themselves. The intention has been this: after the relevant authentic experience, whether sudden or progressive, the means and methods should fall away.

Wherever a ‘mystical’ understanding supplements the ‘doctrinal’ viewpoint of intractable monotheism, the moderately non-dual nature of Christianity becomes clearer. Here, ‘non-dual’ does not purely mean ‘not two’. It means ‘not one, not two, but both one and two’. Both the symbol of Trinity and the symbol of Shiva Nataraja (conceptually different but contiguous) contain difference and unity. Both symbols draw attention to the divine as relational. There is *kenotic* love, both ‘to’ and ‘from’. There is the ‘interwoven’ nature of inter-being, as between the apparently inseparable poles of twoness and oneness. The divine is regarded as ‘within’ and ‘without’ all things; the divine is both immanent and transcendent, ‘containing’ all things and yet ‘contained’ by no thing.⁴⁵⁰ *Perichoresis* might be also viewed as an image of a completely this-worldly way of relating. Our everyday experience is one of polyphonic unity; we are ‘one’ with other humans, yet we retain differences.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵⁰ Along these lines, a play of complementary energies was revered in Hinduism, some centuries before Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam first entered the imagination of human consciousness.

A Chinese Buddhist text from the late 6th century C.E., with the title *Hsin Hsin Ming* (and rendered in English as *On Believing in Mind* and as *On Trust in the Heart*) describes non-dual awakening. A translation by Richard B. Clark begins: ‘The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences’. Towards the end, the text runs as follows:

With a single stroke we are freed from bondage;
nothing clings to us and we hold to nothing.
All is empty, clear, self-illuminating,
with no exertion of the mind’s power.
Here thought, feeling, knowledge, and imagination
are of no value. In this world of Suchness
there is neither self nor other-than-self.
To come directly into harmony with this reality,
just simply say when doubt arises, ‘Not two’.
In this ‘not two’ nothing is separate,
nothing is excluded.

The word ‘All’ in line three would seem to carry fuller resonance than the word initially indicates. It is the ‘All’ of the ‘reality’ of line eight. But Buddhist non-dualism is not the Christian non-dualism of Traherne and company. As used above, the ‘All’ is more akin to an immanentist or naturalistic use of the ‘All’. It does not include a non-corporeal creator. Yet there are intriguing resonances with Christian non-dualism, as discussed in the present study.

⁴⁵¹ In my conditioning, the divine-as-triune provides a theopoetic foundation for intersubjective relations. Within ‘God-self’ the Spirit is regarded as the agent of a ‘full’ co-inhering or co-indwelling. Whatever one ‘member’ of the Godhead knows and does, the ‘others’ know and do. The notion ‘God the Son’ draws attention to the idea that God relates to that which is ‘other’, namely, God relates to *us*. NT passages which grounded the notion of *perichoresis* in Christian theology include Jn 5:19-23, most of Jn 17 and most of 1 Cor. 2.

We are enjoined to place ourselves in the way of realizing or actualizing, in our deepest awareness, the ‘suchness’ of the matter: we are not separate from ‘the All’. The references to ‘not two’ do not necessarily imply an undifferentiated monism. For ‘not two’ does not equate with ‘just One’. A single One would exclude its opposite, namely, ‘Manyness’. It would oppose the plural Many and therefore be dualistic. On the other hand, non-duality (on this view) embraces both unity and multiplicity.

Somewhat differently, within classical *Vedānta* (and its extrapolation in *Advaita Vedānta*) humanity’s Realization is understood as union with the non-corporeal *I Am* of limitless Awareness or Pure Consciousness. Given that it does not accept substantive selfhood, Mahāyāna Buddhism cannot readily speak of any substantive, non-corporeal *I Am*. It sharply differs from *Vedānta*, wherein humanity exists at the level of the eternal-absolute before it exists at the level of the contingent-temporal. Wakefulness here implies a return to abidance in the *Ātmā* or Self. If there is a meaningful Christian parallel, it would be the Johannine abidance in non-dual consciousness of Jesus as the Christ. For in both Hindu and Christian understandings, the presence of a degree of non-dual wisdom is understood to supplement regular cognitive processes.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵² Traherne’s near-contemporary Angelus Silesius (Johannes Scheffler) believed himself graced with non-dual wisdom rather than with the capacity to reason.. Editions of his poems, particularly in German, are numerous. Scheffler was well-read in Eckhart; there is a sense in which he was the latter’s versifier.

‘I am nothing; I am everything’

Wakefulness, for Traherne, includes an awareness that religion can potentially express an original human *goodness*. As borne out in the excerpts from his poems in chapter one, Traherne represents himself as having found an equality of ‘self’ and ‘other’. But his experience includes both unity and duality. Traherne’s tradition had for many centuries maintained that a first step in reaching wakefulness, relatively free of distracting thought, was to develop a meditative discipline of some kind. Accordingly, Traherne accepts the importance of devotion, which implies a dualism between the object of devotion and the devotee.⁴⁵³ As in the Hindu *bhakti* tradition, devotion was seen as an important factor in breaking open and dispersing the power of the false self (or the ego, as we might say). The goal would be not to eliminate the ego, but to bring its delusory manifestations to cognitive awareness. Traherne’s poems, as I have quoted them, exult in a unitive experience. Then he returns to his devotions, in which he is ‘no-thing’. Is this what constitutes so-called mystical experience? Is it constituted by an oscillation between the poles of union and separation; ‘everything’ and ‘no-thing’?⁴⁵⁴ One of Eckhart’s most striking passages on ‘nothingness’ (*niht*) is contained in ‘A Sermon on the Just Man and Justice’. Since it is not a Latin but a German sermon, it is unlikely that Traherne knew it.

⁴⁵³ Traherne might have regarded traditional prayer, of the beseeching kind, as intellectually incoherent. We cannot know his true position; we might recognize ourselves as oscillating between unitive experience and dualistic experience, and as praying accordingly.

⁴⁵⁴ An aphorism from the teachings of Nisargadatta Maharaj (d.1981) has become well known in modern *Advaitin* circles. It runs as follows: ‘When I see I am nothing, that is wisdom. When I see I am everything, that is love. My life is a movement between these two.’ I am not implying that the traditions of Traherne and Nisargadatta are ‘saying the same thing’. But, most curiously, Eckhart and Nisargadatta employ similar words, especially with respect to ‘nothing’ and ‘everything’.

Therefore, if you want to live and want your works to live,
you must be dead to all things and you must have become nothing.
It is characteristic of the creatures that they make something
out of something, but it is characteristic of God that He makes
something out of nothing. Therefore, if God is to make anything
in you or with you, you must beforehand have become nothing.⁴⁵⁵

Distraction, according to Weil ⁴⁵⁶ and to countless writers before her, is the main barrier to a meditative experience. Indeed, distraction is regarded as the major hindrance to an integrated experience of ‘reality’ itself. Those of us who aspire to enter ‘the freedom of the present moment’ find that distractions immediately obtrude. The antidote to distraction is to learn *to attend*. Weil broadly follows the patristics in asserting that perfect attention is tantamount to the vision of God. Aspects of Hinduism, as mentioned earlier, have historically placed great emphasis on attention-giving. Full attention effectively equates with full participation in the Self. For its part, Buddhism is generally intolerant of any concept of the self (whether small-s or capital-S) that might imply self-existence or inherent self-sufficiency. If the total non-substantiality of the self (Skt: *anātman*; Pali: *anatta*) is asserted, this would separate Buddhism irrevocably from Hinduism, from Judeo-Christianity and from Islam. It is my view that popular, Westernized Buddhist apologetics could be more circumspect in claiming that ‘the self’ has no substance. Such a claim might well qualify as an ultimate truth, but can appear overly contentious if treated as true on the conventional level.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁵ This sermon appears (un-numbered) in James M. Clark & John V. Skinner, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises and Sermons*, Collins/Fontana, London (1st ed. Faber & Faber, 1958) 1963, p.50.

⁴⁵⁶ See chapter four regarding Weil and attention-giving.

⁴⁵⁷ If I am correct here, the situation might be alleviated by greater emphasis on the essential interdependence of (all) phenomena. Cf. The analogy of Indra’s net, in which any one jewel can be considered as empty because it only reflects all the

Eckhart's use of 'nothing' and 'nothingness' (*niht/nihil*) to characterize 'the self' of all creatures might imply that he agrees with Buddhist rejection of 'essentialism'. But Eckhart retains the idea of a genuine self, since he places its origin (as a Real Idea, so to say) within the mind of the Infinite, from whose perspective nothing can be separate. I am not sure that transformation through 'wakefulness' needs to rely on an assumption that the self has no substantiality. Granted, a 'search' for a 'true self' will distract me from paying attention to whatever is before me, at this moment. Nonetheless, the many forms of Hinduism, and the diversities within the Judeo-Christian tradition, would not be conceivable without some form of substantial self. Why is this so? Because whenever 'self-transcendence' is alluded to, in the sense of transcending the false or delusory self, there must surely be some kind of self-appropriation. In other words, a degree of self-knowledge or 'self-situating' is required (such as the viewpoint 'I have sinned, therefore I need to be transformed'). This implies the necessity of a self that is sufficiently substantial to be *capable* of appropriation, transformation and continuity.⁴⁵⁸ Be that as it may, a strongpoint of Buddhism is its advocacy of attention-giving. Through meditation, I am encouraged to yield to the 'is-ness'⁴⁵⁹ of the moment. This surrender, to the way things are, is important for Traherne, Julian and Eckhart. In *Return of the Whales*, below, there is an implied surrender to connectedness, coupled with renunciation of bad behaviour.

other jewels. Contrariwise, any one jewel can be considered as full, because it contains all the other jewels. The main 'lesson' of Indra's net (to me) is that I had better keep waking up in order to experience the world non-dualistically.

⁴⁵⁸ In this connection, Merold Westphal writes: 'The bad news (to the false self) is that self-transcendence is self-denial. The good news (to the false self at the end of its tether) is that self-transcendence is self-discovery. Precisely as command, the voice of transcendence offers to the decentered self a triune gift – its own truest self in proper relation both to God and to neighbor.' Quotation from: Westphal, M., *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2004, p.226.

⁴⁵⁹ Seldom used in Eckhart (as *Isticheit*) but of interest to the present study for its implication of direct experience and/or Realization. Julian and Traherne do not use 'is-ness', as such, but can be taken to imply it. See chapters one and three.

Return of the Whales

Whales arch back to the Derwent,
loll near the lighthouse
where we boiled
their ancestors.

In my eucalypt cathedral
I raise binoculars.
Crows swirl by;
pincer beaks

grind out the sound of chains
upon gravel. Hulks risen
from the arrow years,
cow and calf

roll boldly
in a fleet
of white
flags.

Perhaps a number of my poems share an affinity with Traherne's non-dual tendency.⁴⁶⁰ They certainly share Traherne's assumption that creation is sacramental and that something called a sacred cosmology actually exists. And further, that this sacred cosmology interpenetrates the empirical, scientific cosmology.⁴⁶¹ Traherne, Eckhart and Julian wish to 'wake up' their readers. But as their purpose comes to fulfillment, they desire that their images, attitudes and

⁴⁶⁰ But 'Return of the Whales', above, although intended to hint at possibilities of non-duality, is perhaps more imagistic than anything else.

⁴⁶¹ This does not imply that there are two competing cosmologies, or that one or other of the two perspectives should be seen as static and unchanging.

ideas should fall away. For they do not set out to entertain us (although some of their work is diverting) and they do not aim to enchant us with words (although they are capable of that). If, then, their primary goal is to awaken us, what might wakefulness connote? I believe that it connotes, in part, the experience that a true transcendence is not separate from an authentic immanence.⁴⁶² The word ‘experience’, here, corresponds with *Erfahrung* or experience understood as a process of broadening or of self- transformation, rather than with *Erlebnis*, which connotes more of the Buddhist idea of contingent experience.

‘Where our skin stops, our bodies do not stop’

Traherne is a theopoet inasmuch as he wishes to bring vivid, sometimes playful, rhythmical imagery to intimations of the divine in the world and the world in the divine. Our own theopoetic imaginations, like his, can add to understandings of traditional concepts. These understandings are not, in themselves, necessarily at fault. They are part of the languages of theology and serve poetic functions.⁴⁶³ Such a perspective is not acceptable to those whose preferred certitudes are alien to the risky practices of faith.⁴⁶⁴ Those who presume to write as theopoets with a non-dual emphasis will tend to configure the divine as unknowable in

⁴⁶² In the language of *Vedānta*, and of Ramana Maharshi, this experience would be described as surrender to, or abidance in, Self-happiness (*Ātmā-sukhām*) once the Self is accepted as the one Reality which ‘works’ from both within and without to bring about the transcendence of ‘I-ness’.

⁴⁶³ For example, the putting forward of an ontological claim can be seen as a call (subtle or otherwise) for imaginative openness.

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. A remark by Stanislas Breton, *op.cit.*: ‘... the speculative principle of the *Logos* and the poetic principle of the *Mythos* are committed to each other in a creative conflict which unfolds in the free space of the *imaginaire*’ (*op.cit.*, p.141). Breton is quoted and referenced in chapter three in connection with Phil. 2.

essential ways. This does not imply that the divine is inaccessible. On the basic tenet of Christianity, God is approachable to humanity through the human Jesus, who is subsequently re-imaged or re-imagined as Jesus the Christ. Such a teaching requires poetics, signs, symbols, and relational discourses. Together, poetry and relationality speak of the particular and the universal; they have to do with communication as community's foundation, both in its parts and as a whole.

Traherne, Eckhart and Julian passionately desire to coax their readers to a life of communion and wholeness. Inseparable from this desire is the conviction that self-emptying (*kenosis*) is involved. Within mainstream Christian teachings, the false (phenomenal) self is encouraged to participate in a kind of death; this is prefigured in baptism and viewed as a necessary condition for inner resurrection. The false self is held to be continuously making way for the gradual transformation of the entire human family. Within such a transformative perspective, I can appropriate a pre-Christian language, a language which sees the destiny of humanity as abiding in its true Self, capital 'S'. It should be clear, however, that the Self (capital 'S') is not discussed in classical *Vedānta* in relation to a false self. And Ramana, as a thorough-going *Advaitin*, follows Śhaṅkara is not attributing substantial existence to any lesser or false self.⁴⁶⁵

It seems appropriate, here, to return to Ramana's counterpointing of the qualified non-dualism of my three 'mystical' theologians. There is a sense in which the divine, in Ramana's understanding, is the affective immediacy of the Self, uncovered in our innermost dimension.

⁴⁶⁵ Ramana produced a loose translation in Tamil of a basic treatise on *Advaita* attributed to Śhaṅkara. The treatise is *The Crown Gem of Discrimination* (Skt. *Vivekachudamani*).

Such is our true nature; forgetfulness of this ‘heart truth’ is our primary fault. Thomas Forsthoefel interprets Ramana thus:

We are the Self already. We know this in some relevant sense although, owing to misplaced, habituated identifications, it has escaped our active attention. ... Grace ... should not be construed as something external to the subject. Instead, it is the divine operating within and outside the individual soul to usher in ultimate self-revelation. ... The appropriate response to the incessant presence of grace is surrender, a term which Ramana repeats frequently.⁴⁶⁶

Later, Forsthoefel adds: ‘The Self, beyond form and particularization, effulgent and blissful, is our deepest truth, and we need only to go inward and access it’.⁴⁶⁷ Conceptually, the metaphysic behind such understandings is what I have called strong non-dualism. This metaphysic is closely linked to an epistemology of spiritual experience. The epistemology is, in general terms, internalist in its spirit and tone. That is to say, it tends to regard certain basic beliefs as self-justifying and self-authenticating. Within such an epistemology, Ramana can represent authentic spiritual experience (*anubhava*) as an experience of interiority involving direct or immediate awareness of that which is already the case, metaphysically. Such experience is contingent upon an on-going surrender of the little self and its attachments, provided we understand that renunciation can ‘earn’ nothing. It is a *re-membering*, a return to that which is already the natural expression of the Self.

⁴⁶⁶ Forsthoefel, T.A., *Knowing Beyond Knowledge*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 2007, p.142f.

⁴⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.179.

As the little or false self is enabled to let go of its sense of separateness, it enters the ‘Delightfull’ (Traherne) prospect of knowing itself as the Self.⁴⁶⁸ That is to say, the self can potentially experience itself as not separate from the Self (which might, or might not, be accorded an epistemological equivalence with our divine Source).⁴⁶⁹ The leading metaphysical assumption, here, is that true knowledge of the Self has soteriological consequences. But does the Self exist at all? And, if it does, can it honestly be equated with the Source, as this Source is implied in Traherne’s work (and mine)? Can the Self be brought into conjunction with what a Christian might mean by ‘God’? Such questions do not admit of clear answers. What *is* clear is that Ramana’s emphasis on inwardness or internalism (rather than, but including, a degree of externalism) results in a trans-cultural, universalist non-dualism. This relies on a minimal and eventually ‘non-abstract’ metaphysic which cannot be ‘locked into’ any localized context.

Abstract metaphysics is not exactly to the forefront in the following verses,⁴⁷⁰ taken from the First Epistle of John. The words carry a profusion of verbs; their trajectory is one of on-going awareness.

Something which has existed since the beginning,
which we have heard,

⁴⁶⁸ In Christian terms, Dorothy Lee could be commenting on Traherne’s repeated use of ‘Bliss’, ‘Delight’ and ‘Delightfull’ when she writes: ‘The rapture that draws God, as it were, out of heaven to earth also draws the believer out of an enclosed selfhood into the beauty and luminosity of God. Towards this rapture – the beauty of the life of God – Jesus leads his faltering disciples, as he ascends the mount of transfiguration. Here beauty is closely linked, not only to love and yearning, but also to pleasure, enjoyment and ecstasy, an experience that is as much sensuous as spirited.’ Quotation from: Lee, D., *Transfiguration*, Continuum, London, p.129. I do not imply that Lee is sympathetic to the Upanishadic language of ‘the Self’.

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Ramana Maharshi on this question: ‘God’s grace consists in the act that He shines in the heart of everyone as the Self. That power of grace does not exclude anyone, whether good or otherwise.’ Quoted but not referenced, in: *Diary for 2010*, Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu.

⁴⁷⁰ I have not intended, in this study, to dismiss metaphysics *per se*. A.N.Whitehead points out that early Christians, given their contexts and their spiritual experiences, were obliged to tackle metaphysical issues. Principally, they had to attempt an adequate expression of a real immanence of God in the world. See Whitehead’s *Adventures of Ideas*, The Free Press, NY, 1967 (or various much earlier editions).

which we have seen with our own eyes,
which we have watched
and touched with our own hands,
the Word of life –
this is our theme.
That life was made visible;
we saw it and are giving our testimony,
declaring to you the eternal life,
which was present to the Father
and has been revealed to us.
We are declaring to you
what we have seen and heard,
so that you may share our life.
(1 Jn 1:1-3, NJB)

There is frank receptivity here; it is the corollary of awareness. There is also a sense of dependency. I also see in these verses the following: wherever an epiphany has occurred, and the Presence seems to have been experienced in some qualified way, there will be *trust*. There will not be an idol of God. An idol produces a delusory satisfaction; this is the viewpoint of Marion, who has written of the distinction between idols and icons.⁴⁷¹ Any concept can be reified to the extent becoming a fixed mental position, and thereby an idol. By contrast, an icon can confer a genuine sense of satisfaction or ease or rest.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ See Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being*, trans. T.A. Carlson, Chicago University Press, Chicago, ILL, 1991.

⁴⁷² To allude to the words of Karl Barth, an icon 'both unveils and veils' something of reality. I think Barth is advocating the view that God is not to be grasped; God is not cognitively understandable. That which is valuable must therefore be a relationship of dependency and trust.

To claim that Traherne is an iconic poet is to claim that he endeavours to enlarge and to synthesise what we might feel and know. The kind of knowledge with which he is chiefly concerned is *felt* knowledge. Although discursively inclined, he seems to be skeptical about any statement of ‘truth’ or ‘being’ which is based solely on cognition. His inherited Christian symbolic structure is not so much to be analysed, as ‘responded to’. Open-heartedness is required; likewise, a readiness to begin to forego the false or little self. It is not always helpful to use the word ‘ego’ to characterize the false self. The use of ‘ego’ needs qualification; the injunction ‘abandon your ego’ is not likely to be referring (say) to the Freudian ego. In any case, an apparent act of choosing to sacrifice the ego can be seen as a concealed act of egoic calculation. Does not the ego need to be ‘seen into’ or scrutinized rather than abandoned?

Throughout this study I have implied that *kenosis* and *kenotic* action (cf. *śūnyatā*: emptiness, or the word I prefer: openness) will work against individualism. There will be movement from subjective experience towards intersubjective experience. This is the intention of the meditative stream within which Traherne writes; he does not accept the possibility of deep spiritual experience without a positive (in his case, non-dual) manifestation within the world. In consonance with such a view of truth (namely, that truth is valid to the extent that it is *lived truth*⁴⁷³) any form of awakening will only be as sound as the love it results in. Here is an echo of Julian and Eckhart, who write within different meditative streams from that of Traherne. Eckhart’s ‘... you must have become nothing’ passage, cited earlier, does not hang suspended,

⁴⁷³ The importance of truth as ‘not truth unless lived out bodily’ has been emphasized throughout the present study as a *sine qua non* of my three writers. It is truth understood to be literally ‘experience-able’ (*erfahrbar*).

without antecedent or long-term consequence. In this connection, John Milbank writes as follows:

Going ‘inward’ to attain contemplative unity is not, for Eckhart,
the final goal – as it never is, for all authentic Christian mystics.
To the contrary, the attainment of perfect detachment,
or a kind of refusal to let contingent circumstances alter one’s
fundamental abiding mood of openness to God,
is a way of allowing the divine love to come to constant new birth
in one’s soul, and so of proceeding ecstatically outward
toward others. The ‘emptied’ soul is also the fertile soul,
the soul open to performing God’s will as its own
and so of acting creatively,
which means precisely to act without egotism ...⁴⁷⁴

I have attempted a degree of mediation between three writers around the idea of a qualified, ‘spiritually-applicable’ non-dualism. Each wrote against the grain of the conventional theologizing of their day. They did unusual things with language. Traherne, closer to our sensibility than the other two, is nonetheless part of a hierarchical institution, the Church of England. The liturgy and hymnology of his church was saturated with monarchical imagery: God is King or Lord, reigning like the top Feudalist, tweaking history for the sake of his subjects. Yet, so intense was Traherne’s sense of realized Presence that the God of his poems is more of a lyrical lover than a dominator.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁴ Quotation from: Žižek, S. & Milbank, J., *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Davis, C., ed.) The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2009, p.207.

⁴⁷⁵ Hence I can hypothesise that Traherne might have concurred with the general direction of 20th century process theology.

As mentioned in chapter one, Traherne is regarded by Inge as a theologian of desire. Perhaps the least egoic expression of desire is an active compassion, where compassion is detached in the Eckhartian sense. This true compassion is the fruit of the wakeful consciousness. We are drawn to it. Or is it that we are drawn *by* it? Drawn, rather, by Sophia? Eckhart does not employ the word Sophia as a name; he writes (instead?) of ‘Sacred Presence’ and ‘My Essence’. Introducing Schürmann’s great interpretation of Eckhart, David Appelbaum writes of non-duality under the sign of Sophia.

The transformative flash of Sophia is a cosmic event
that is recorded jointly in God and in a human being.
This is the brilliant height of Eckhart’s realization.
We – humanity and God – are co-workers in a universe
subject to a nameless transforming force, emanating from the
unmanifest and disclosing to God and humans alike that which is.⁴⁷⁶

Such a comment does not take into account the Eckhartian puzzle of seeming to suggest a shared ontology between God and humanity. A tentative ‘solution’ (mentioned in chapter two) is that Eckhart is best assessed, today, as a theopoet who is sometimes given to hyperbolic rhetoric. For example, in Eckhart’s non-dual interpretation of the birth of ‘the Son’ in our souls, there is a sense in which humanity becomes the realization of God’s presence. This is because the birth is ‘back into God’.

Having become fully manifest in both image and likeness
in humankind through the *birth of the Word* in time and place,
the indwelling Triune God retracts the universe into itself

⁴⁷⁶ See Schürmann, R., *op.cit.*, p.xv.

through the birth of the soul back into God – Eckhart’s great theme of *breakthrough*.⁴⁷⁷

As for Traherne, we saw that the first verse of *My Spirit* concludes with the non-dual mystery of the poet’s ‘Essence’. This is ‘... Not shut up here, but evry Where.’ The transcendence of boundaries is also the theme of other poems, such as *Goodnesse*. My poem *Sister Spider*⁴⁷⁸ attempts a parallel capaciousness: ‘... where our skin stops, / our bodies do not stop.’ Traherne reflects on a similar awareness, filtered through a Christian narrative, and sees ‘being One’ as the sign of divine openness. His theopoetic imagination leads him to combine feeling with thought in the attempt to glimpse a fragment of the meaning of infinity. The first verse of *Goodnesse* includes two of his favourite words: ‘Bliss’ and ‘Esteem’. Both in his prose and poetry he uses ‘right Esteem’ and ‘rightly Esteem’. The ideal is to see something ‘as it is’. In a poem called *Bluebottle Jellyfish at Manly* I finish with a similar thought.

But if we ever saw
the way things are,
we’d know ourselves inseparable
from bags of gas, from tentacles:
the paralysis they promise,
the release.

In Traherne, it is through ‘right Esteem’ that I will become an ‘enlarged Soul’. Such a soul sees the artificiality of boundaries. It is not the case that particularity is ignored; rather, that the

⁴⁷⁷ Woods, R.J., *Eckhart’s Way*, Veritas, Dublin, [1986] 2009, p.40; italics in the original.

⁴⁷⁸ *My Spirit*, *Goodnesse* and *Sister Spider* are quoted in chapter one.

emphasis lies with a non-dual 'whole'. A balance needs to be kept between the absolute level of discourse and the relative or conventional level of quotidian experience. While a eucalypt seed is potentially a eucalypt tree, many pre-requisites need to be fulfilled; similarly, subtle egoic tendencies will lead me to nurture premature fantasies that I am approaching the mature tree of Wakefulness. Pre-requisites will include Eckhart's releasement or non-attachment, discernment and discrimination, and an ego-free aspiration for liberation or holiness or wholeness.

Although I construe Traherne, Eckhart and Julian as theopoets of 'being One', I hope to have indicated that each one has a singularity of tone. In Traherne, the divine unfolds itself through bodies; our bodies are graced to be God-substance, expressed as form. Julian has a different but converging outlook. She holds that when we see with spiritual vision, we see each other as infinitely loved. Seeing this, we assist each other to bring an eternal vision to actual, daily experience. Traherne perhaps magnifies the unifying mystery with less sentimental words:

Are not all His Treasures yours, and yours His? Is not your very Soul
and Body His; Is not His Life and Felicity Yours: Is not His Desire yours?
... Do you extend your Will like Him, and you shall be Great as He is,
and concerned and Happy in all these. ... Verily if ever you would enjoy God,
you must enjoy His Goodness. ... And when you do so, you are the
Universal Heir of God and All Things. GOD is yours and the Whole World.
You are His, and you are all; Or in all, and with all.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁹ Margoliouth vol.1, *op.cit.*, p.26f.

In such a virtuosic fusion of matter/spirit, Traherne manifests his conviction that ‘infinite Worth shut up in the Limits of a Material Being, is the only way to a Real Infinity.’⁴⁸⁰ I have implied that his medieval predecessors follow a similar trajectory towards oneness with the divine. Eckhart, most controversially, appears to move this oneness towards ‘a union of indistinction’. But all three writers maintain a two-fold view of this mystical union. First, they accept a primordial or pre-existing union. Second, they accept the need for a return to union. This is based, in their respective frameworks, on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but must enter an individual’s affective inner experience and be ‘worked through’ in an outwardly engaged life.

The giving-of-attention to re-memembering the union will lead to *kenosis*. This, in turn, will lead to inner stillness (Gk: *hesychia*; L: *quietas*). Such ‘heart stillness’ is the ground of participation with the Unnameable Mystery. Participation with divine intentions and activities is possible because God has first created communion. That which was separate is brought near, and closer than ‘near’. The divine merges with humanity so that humanity can merge with the divine. In merging, they become not only ‘at one’ but (in a sense) become one another.

Rublev’s icon of the Trinity and the sculpture of Shiva Nataraja were discussed in the previous chapter. Both are visual theo-poems which dynamically illustrate the necessary balance of transcendence with immanence. An icon is an abnormal artwork because it brings the perspective of the *invisible* to the fore. We are not dealing with strictly logical arguments; the icon is meant to be *sensibly* understood. To the viewer who sees that the invisible is seeing her,

⁴⁸⁰ *Centuries 3:20, op.cit.*, p.122.

the transcendent world has penetrated the ordinary world. The immanent and the transcendent have combined to bring transformation. Another way of writing this would be to say that within the ‘heart’ of the viewer of the sculpture or icon, immanence has transcended itself. The ‘heart’ has apprehended the reality which *always was*: there is no such thing as a separate, single being.

But if I share the Rublevian intuition that the divine is triadic, does this have to be equated with an absolute postulate of onto-theology? Might not tri-unity be preserved as a lively image of engagement, interdependency, and interconnectedness? On such a view, the *I Am* does not exist without the *May You Be*. There is no *I Am* without *You Are*. In addition, the *You Are* of you allows the *I Am* of me and vice versa. Within this perspective, each person is an *I Am* in essence, but not ultimately separate from any other *I Am*. This is not to suggest that human nature can be reduced to an unchanging essence. I am not alluding to *passé* essentialism, but to a theopoetic perspective which devolves from the *perichoretic* and *kenotic* ground of relational theology.⁴⁸¹

A recognition of the relationship between the ‘I’ of the divine Father/Mother and the ‘I’ of the son/daughter means surrendering a personal sense of individualism. This is because the recognition of divine/human inseparability is the recognition of divine consciousness as the Selfhood of all. The personal sense of self is subsumed in the vision of the *I Am*. Traherne, Julian and Eckhart share the vision of one divine ‘I’, of one unbounded Selfhood in which we

⁴⁸¹ Like all other theologies, the one which might be called ‘a relational theopoetic’ is language-bound. But it rightly presumes to make reference to That which is not language-bound.

participate. Their prayer is that humanity should awaken to this Presence. But Ramana takes this conceptually further, in the direction of no differentiation whatsoever. He is an *Advaitin* who adheres to a classically *Vedāntin* application of *Tat tvam asi*. Yet it remains a source of fascination, to people such as myself, that his teaching resonates with words attributed to Jesus. A disciple approached Ramana and asked: ‘Of the devotees, who is the greatest?’ Here is Ramana’s reply:

He who gives himself up to the Self that is God is the most excellent devotee. Giving one’s self up to God means remaining constantly in the Self without giving room for the rise of any thoughts other than the thought of the Self. Whatever burdens are thrown on God, He bears them. Since the supreme power of God makes all things move, why should we, without submitting ourselves to it, constantly worry ourselves with thoughts as to what should be done and how, and what should not be done and how not? We know that the train carries all loads, so after getting on it why should we carry our small luggage on our head to our discomfort, instead of putting it down in the train and feeling at ease? ⁴⁸²

A potential puzzle within the three Christian writers is this: although no *I Am* is ultimately separate from any other *I Am*, each *I Am* carries its particular identity. There is differentiation, but also unity. The symbol of tri-unity alludes to interacting, cooperative being/Being. It hints at the accountability of one person for the next person and of one community for the next. In the largest sense, it is ‘eco-relevant’. From the transpersonal to the cosmic, there is one differentiated All, intricately interwoven. Here, the word ‘All’ is not used in a purely immanentist or naturalistic sense. It is used to indicate the totality of reality, as *inclusive* of a

⁴⁸² The quotation is from Ramana’s short but principal work *Who Am I?* This is published in *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (*op.cit.*) p.43.

divine creator. It would appear that Traherne, Eckhart and Julian risked an intuition that ‘the All’ might create itself from the inside, as it were. It might well be that they favoured the creation of a shared spiritual sensibility, within a latent respect for religious differences.

Conclusion

The motion in Traherne, Eckhart and Julian is from dualistic toward non-dualistic experience. That is to say, it is from a dualism of the divine and the human, wherein the relation to the divine is potentially one of disquiet (with dualistically conceived worship and devotion) toward a moderate non-dualism. In the types of non-dualism described by Loy (*ad loc.*) the position of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian correlates, to a qualified degree, with the third type; namely, the non-difference of subject and object.

Under an expanding vision of the purport of the *I Am* (*ad loc.*) as exemplified for them in Christ, Traherne, Eckhart and Julian move toward a less personal sense of self and a greater recognition of one infinite Selfhood. They understand this Selfhood or divine Consciousness as that which creates, redeems and re-creates. At an absolute level of truth, this Consciousness is the Selfhood of all being. At the conventional level of truth this is the divine being who invites recognition or Realization. For Traherne, Eckhart and Julian this occurs within a framework of on-going surrender through the traditional Christian means of grace. From the perspective of moderate non-dualism, spiritual life can be both personal and impersonal. It is impersonal to the degree that the indivisibility of the divine Presence is recognized. Implicit to such a perspective is an expanding sense of the divine awareness behind Jesus' statement 'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30 NRSV).

It is basic to the Christian consciousness of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian that when they write non-dualistically, they presuppose the experience of baptism 'into Christ' (Gal. 3:27 NRSV). From the start, as it were, the primary sacrament of baptismal identification with Christ

contains both non-dualism and dualism. The dualistic element is present in the 'vertical' relation to the transcendent God who (on this reckoning) 'endorses' baptism. The non-dual element is present in the 'horizontal' relation of interior identification with the personal Christ who is taken to be God's human expression. But Traherne, Eckhart and Julian take the intimacy of this non-dual element in the direction of Asian tradition, up to a point. They do this by emphasizing the unitive ground of humanity in the divine, in such a way as to resonate with a Ramana-like emphasis on the all-embracing, absolutely unitive nature of the Self. This analogy with Ramana would break down, if and where Ramana asserted a completely immanent or 'horizontal' Self (and an experience of the world as completely non-plural). The analogy would also break down, if and where Traherne, Eckhart and Julian asserted that the divine is completely transcendent or 'vertical' (and the world is experienced as absolutely plural).

This study has offered a poet's perspective. It has understood Traherne, Eckhart and Julian as theopoets who share what might be dubbed a qualified non-dualism of subject and object. They were also interpreted as sharing a concern for unitive spiritual experience. In re-appropriating their purport, extensive reference was made to the concepts of *kenosis* and *perichoresis*. Throughout, implicit attention was paid to a motif of openness and to partial convergence. It was suggested that Traherne's non-dualism has been overlooked, even within current Trahernian studies. This, despite the fact that he is capable of 'writing non-dualism' with felicitous clarity. Eckhart, by contrast, is notable for enticing opacity. His non-dualism is aporetic to the extent that he can be taken to suggest a shared ontology between the divine and humanity. Julian's non-dual tone is perhaps overlooked in a popular exultation at her feminine

imagery. Her nominal sentimentality is countered by a striking immediacy and a brash originality. She seems adamant that the divine is ultimately inseparable from created humanity. Yet she safeguards God's distinction; the divine cannot be grasped or understood (because it already creates, grasps, and understands *us*). Thus she manages the non-dual puzzle by balancing the Absolute truth-level of discourse with the relative or conventional truth-level. She reiterates her two truths: humanity's ultimate destiny is oneness with God, yet this oneness can be appropriated in the present moment.

Holding in heart and mind the *coincidentia oppositorum* discerned by Bonaventure, I have depicted Traherne's Christianity as a distinctive perspective on *Advaita*. As in Rublev's visual poem *The Holy Trinity*, there is an inner dynamism to Traherne's work and to that of Julian and Eckhart.⁴⁸³ They accept that humankind can know itself both theopoetically and literally to 'inter-exist' and to be 'inter-involved'. A possible construal is that this represents a shift away from the defensiveness of the phenomenal self and towards 'the Self'. As already noted, I have co-opted the term 'the Self' from its *Vedāntin* usage, in which 'the Self' (or eternal principle or substrate of our existence) manifests through the phenomenal self. The teachings of Ramana Maharshi were therefore offered in this study by way of analogy. Ramana's strong non-dualism served to counterpoint the moderate non-dualism of Traherne, Eckhart and Julian. To the extent that the three Christians validate subjective experience, Ramana does the same, except that he treats subjectivity always in the singular. He claims that the plural form of the word adds nothing. This is because 'selves' are gathered into unity, into 'the Self'. Since 'the

⁴⁸³ *Contra* a historical tendency to define energies or entities as if they actually inhabit a world of our concepts.

Self' is not a possible object of consciousness, the way to 'locate' it is through direct, immediate experience (without objectifying it).

Christians have built up a personal language, such that 'person' is predicated not only of individuals but of the divine. Ramana, however, employs both personalist and impersonalist understandings. He nuances the Christian view of the Redeemer as *agape* (and the redemption as *agape*) by supporting the personalism of devotion. And yet, aware of the human tendency to think 'objectively', Ramana maintains that the least inappropriate language for the divine will remain impersonal. Traherne, Eckhart and Julian also write at the Absolute truth-level as well as at the conventional truth-level. If and where they are absolutist with regard to union with the divine, they balance this with the necessity to act with integrity in the empirical world. To the extent that they are non-dual, then their devotion to the divine is non-dual devotion. Ramana's life of 'devotion without difference' (*abheda bhakti*) is the factor which balances his strongly Absolute level of discourse. Since he stresses the disappearance of ego-centredness, one might hypothesise that surrender or devotion are given empirical priority over an experience of intuitive Realization.

Traherne, Eckhart and Julian are persuaded of the importance of finding an 'open space' within ourselves. In such a 'space' we can be still, and know that we are neither our thoughts nor our bodies nor our senses: these are objects of our awareness, the source of which is beyond any material account. Traherne, Eckhart and Julian appear to concur with Ramana on these points (granted that *Vedāntin* and Christian metaphysics are incompatible) but frame the unitive experience as incarnational. That is to say, they construe the divine-human union as the Spirit's

work of diffusing or expanding the event of Christ to become an on-going reality in the world. Incompatible forms of words might conceal a compatible release of divine energy. It is my view that this energy continues to create and to transform, under differing signs and symbols. An awakening (which is one and the same awakening) would seem to be capable of a limitless range of expression. For his part, Ramana offers the non-difference of subject and object as something to be ‘Realized’ in direct experience of (Eckhart’s?) ‘true nature’. The contribution of Panikkar, where he appears to offer extrapolations of Ramana, was discussed in chapter five. But neither Ramana nor Panikkar are necessarily monistic. They are inexact and ambiguous on the precise relationship between divine Oneness and sensible phenomena.

A sense of inseparability does not imply non-differentiation, as it might in some kinds of sub-continental non-dualism. This study pointed to possible affinities of Traherne with *Advaita Vedānta*. I did not argue that Traherne is non-dualistic in the unqualified sense attributed to Śaṅkarā. If Śaṅkarā’s non-dualism was to imply monism, this would not mean that other types of Hindu are monistic. There are non-dual systems (for example, those devolving from Rāmānuja) which assert the union of humanity with *Brahman* and at the same time encourage devotional practises which are self-evidently non-monistic.

Eckhart, Julian and Traherne desire, not so much to instruct as to awaken us. To this end, they tend to regard the world as replete with signs that point to a *transcensus*. Time itself is viewed as not only *chronos* but *kairos*, the now-moment to ‘receive inwardly’ (*intus suscipere*) and to make a life-orientating decision. No clear description of non-dualism is provided by either writer; their views might oscillate between various meanings, as mentioned in the Introduction.

The puzzle persists, but prudence might indicate that they do not mean a literal ‘oneness’ so much as an inability to enact ‘twoness’. By this I mean that they regard other people, and conceivably all other life forms, as elements of their own selfhood. Accordingly, they regard the sufferings of others as their own sufferings, in part. Apparent ‘opposites’ are deemed, to some extent, to nourish each other in fruitful coincidence.

Traherne’s overtly non-dual poems were construed (chapter one) as bringing together experiential and conceptual truth in a vision of transformation. But of course all three writers are concerned with experience and transformation. As mentioned, neither of them discusses the varieties of non-dualism; they do not wish to impart cognitive sophistication, but to awaken people. Yet Traherne is somewhat different in that he begins with imaginative re-creations of the non-dualism of childhood, rather than beginning with theology. It might be said that he held imaginative truth in tension with conceptual truth and experiential truth in tension with both. I briefly hypothesised that Traherne, Eckhart and Julian might have favoured a form of panentheism. Speaking generally, panentheism argues that the divine works in and through a fully-connected universe, yet is not limited thereby. In the case of these three writers, such an ‘inter-weave’ of subject and object implies a moderate non-dualism. The paradox appears to be as follows: within unitive experience there is not necessarily a loss of personal differentiation. The experience occurs within a world of immanence and choice.

Central to Eckhart (chapter two) was his use of *Gelâzenheit* (‘letting-be’ or ‘releasement’). This was taken to involve the non-dual ‘awakening’ which served as the theme of chapter five. We are encouraged to awaken to a form of consciousness without an object. Eckhart was

reluctant to over-conceptualize the divine, insofar as this is ever possible. Instead, he desired to present an integration of mind and heart within awareness that ‘God is my being, but I am not the being of God’. As with Julian (chapter three) and Traherne, he hinted that it is possible to pass beyond thought and image and to enter an experience of inseparability from God. Projections which might have to do with ‘reward’ (heaven) or ‘punishment’ (hell) have little relevance in this kind of theology. From a poet’s viewpoint, the nub of the qualified non-dualism of Traherne, Julian and Eckhart is a lessening of division and a growing realization of wholeness. Their emphasis lay with our inclinations and where these can take us, *within us* as well as ‘without’. But interiority cannot be separated from that which Traherne calls ‘true apprehension’. He insists: ‘Tis not the Object, but the Light / That maketh Heaven; Tis a Purer Sight. / Felicitie / Appears to none but them that purely see.’⁴⁸⁴

In Eckhartian terms, the little spark (*Vüncelîn*) or little castle (*Bürgelin*) resonates with the ‘I Am’⁴⁸⁵ of Exodus 3:14 to find an ‘I am’ (Skt: *aham asmi*) in the depths of the heart, the organ of apperception, that is not separate from anyone else’s ‘I am’. Through *Gelâzenheit* the transformed self will live ‘without a why’ (*sunder war umbe*) in union with the One ‘without a why’ who creates the ‘I am-ness’ which we are. This is not an ontological sameness of essence. It is, perhaps, a bio-spiritual oneness, after the manner of the statement attributed to Jesus: ‘The Father and I are one.’⁴⁸⁶ Such a union with the One is deemed to be available in human experience, through dynamic, *perichoretic* relationality. Did the three writers at the centre of this study anticipate what is now called a process-relational understanding of God? Such

⁴⁸⁴ Ridler, p.14.

⁴⁸⁵ Different renderings of Ex. 3:14 (‘I Am That I Am’) were briefly mentioned in chapter two of the present study.

⁴⁸⁶ Jn 10:30, NRSV

hypothesising would include a re-definition of the traditional ‘omni’ descriptors of God. Insofar as these ‘omni’ words have implied an abstract immutability in the divine, they would be reconfigured as enhancing the creaturely freedom of the daughters and sons of the divine. In Eckhart’s opinion, these heirs of the divine are all ‘words of God’.

The work of Traherne, Eckhart, Julian and Ramana might usefully be characterized in terms of ‘non-separation’. Nothing exists independently; at the absolute level of truth, that which might appear solid or personal is really transparent and impersonal. The emphasis on unitive reality, or unitive consciousness, brings Ramana into proximity with the three Christians. In the *Vedāntin* teaching of Ramana, the phenomenal self is lured beyond its false self-identification (a characteristic of the conventional level of truth) by the eternal Self. Eckhartian language converges here, inasmuch as the Meister believes that the individual self, with its sense of separateness, falls away as it learns to participate in the divine. The ‘separated self’ or ego⁴⁸⁷ is ‘natural’, producing the day-to-day functioning sense of ‘I-ness’. In reality, however, this ‘I’ is the false or phenomenal ‘I’. It is to be distinguished from the true, eternal Self, which is ultimately One and which waits to be ‘uncovered’ as the undercurrent of our real nature.

In a discussion of non-duality in the Bhagavad Gītā, Loy writes: ‘... to experience God is to forget oneself to the extent that one becomes aware of a consciousness pervading everywhere and everything. ... The sense of ‘holiness’ (Otto’s ‘the numinous’) is not something added onto

⁴⁸⁷ Eckhart does not use the word ‘ego’ but *mit Eigenschaft* (‘with attachment to self’). Thus he connotes an individual possessiveness which might generate the illusion of separate existence. To countermand *Eigenschaft*, Eckhart puts forward the interior activity of ‘cutting loose’, *abegescheidenheit*, which characterizes the letting-be or releasement of *Gelâzenheit*. There is no precise equation between the lesser or false self (of long tradition) and the ego (of modernist characterization). The contexts for the respective usages are incompatible. Nonetheless, ‘ego’ can serve, on the understanding that through mindfulness it can become an object of awareness.

the phenomenal world ... but is an inherent characteristic of ‘my’ self-luminous mind, although realized only when its true nature is experienced.’⁴⁸⁸ Although Loy (as a Buddhist) locates the absolute level of truth within quotidian life, the tendency of anyone to focus on ultimate truth need not entail the neglect of relative truth. It is a question of precedence, rather than of competition. Traherne, for example, carries an ultimate discourse through his poems and meditations; at the same time, he practices and teaches on the relative or conventional level. His emphasis on immanence has the effect, at times, of humanizing the divine, despite his plethora of abstract and sometimes regally-oriented diction. He does not dissolve the contradiction of existence by prelapsarian fantasy. Despite the recapitulation of his childhood’s sense of tranquil oneness with the divine, he does not wish to leave us there but to return us to the quotidian with fresh eyes. Nor, despite a degree of congruency with *Advaita*, does Traherne write of non-dual experience as if he accepted the *Vedāntic* realization of *Brahman*.

In the language of *Advaita*, it could perhaps be said that Traherne, Eckhart and Julian are practitioners of *abheda bhakti* (devotion without difference). That is to say, they practice non-dual devotion while at the same time teaching scripture, prayer, meditation and personal asceticism. To continue the analogy with Ramana⁴⁸⁹ it is notable that he also favours such activities, as a means of remaining open to grace. It is important to Ramana that no-one should entertain a premature belief that they have reached or ‘Realized’ the affective, lived-experience of non-dual truth.

⁴⁸⁸ Loy, *op.cit.*, p.291.

⁴⁸⁹ A more recent exemplar of sub-continental *abheda bhakti*, namely, Mata Amritanandamayi (born 1953) likewise inculcates a union of the absolute level of truth and the relative or conventional level of truth.

In summary, this study has presented Traherne, Eckhart and Julian as theopoets of ‘being One’ who share a catechetical interest in reminding people to become fully human. The *conditio sine qua non* is participation in the divine. All three were understood to advance the view that humanity participates with the divine in the world’s transformation. All three were depicted as engaged with the world, through degrees of non-attachment. Eckhart, in particular, was seen to advocate releasement or non-attachment as potentially the deepest way to engage with all creation. Engagement emerged, in each writer, through their re-weavings of ‘feeling’ with ‘thought’ and of spirituality with theology. Their texts revealed their self-understanding as agents of Love’s transforming narrative, evoking surrender to the immanence of transcendence. Nonetheless, many points of interpretation are contested and remain to be further explored. This study has made a tentative beginning.

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